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"AT A TIME LIKE THIS"

A Play in Three Acts

by

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INTRODUCTION

"At a Time Like This" is a snatch of a few hours from the life of the Rouse family, a well-established group in a small Midwestern farming community. The family is portrayed at a peculiar time, the hours before the head of the house is buried.

A combination of the slice-of-life and the more conventional beginning-middle-and-end dramatic form was used in writing the play. The "thinking" characters--Buell, Mary Lou, and to some extent, Mama--are handled under the latter form and the "non-thinking" characters--Alma, Zetta, and Wendell--are more sliced from life. The open rebellion of the son Buell and his sister Mary Lou destroys any idea of stereotyped behavior advocated by their mother and aunt Zetta. The children's actions reach a climax and resolution while their elders and Wendell remain somewhat static.

The play covers about eighteen hours before Bond Rouse, the almost completely unappreciated and unrecognized head of the household, is buried. Buell, his eldest son and "spitting image," is taking up where his father left off. Buell rejects the Rouse family bank which in the short space of two generations has become the tradition his mother cherishes. His decision to farm not only means the end of the banking Rouses, but it brings him back to the home and town where neither he nor his father could adjust.

As the unwanted Buell returns home to make the oncoming years "a life of living hell" for his mother, her beloved daughter has realized there is something false and terribly unrational about the family, and she proposes to leave.

Not understanding the negative unity her husband Bond gave to the

family, Alma dreams of a brighter existence with him dead. In her narrow mind she believes the bad times are gone now. It is inevitable that she realize to some extent that she is wrong. The problem in writing was to what degree Alma would realize that she has not been both mother and father to her children. The lesser degree of realization was drawn because Alma is an unthinking character and the full import of her changed position in the family would not come suddenly any more than Zetta would completely understand her own changed relationship to the family.

By the end of the play, Alma loses not only her children and her role as mother-martyr but also her position in the community as wife of the town's banker. With the death of her husband she becomes re-affiliated with the farm she hates. This is revenge for Bond Rouse and a fitting conclusion to the life of a man who never felt the unity he gave to the family. With his death, the family no longer exists as a unit. In the midst of the bickering and pettiness which has existed since their childhood, the children are breaking away and their mother has lost the "villain" who in the past was used to rally them about her.

As the family breaks up, it is the grandmother, Mama, who directs their last moments of action. It may be objected that her part in the ending is too contrived since she is not more active earlier in the play. But she is a stable, understanding, and "thinking" character to whom all members of the family have turned at one time or another. Her persistent withdrawal from the situation and the family makes even more dramatic her action at the end when she becomes the guiding hand necessary to give direction to the others while revealing their foibles with her direct questions.

Mama, Buell, and Mary Lou achieve realization in varying degrees and their actions culminate in a more conventional play ending. The non-thinkers, treated as slice-of-life characters, find no definite solutions. The front porch swing will become the common meeting ground where, as Buell says early in the first act, Alma and Zetta can "sit out on the porch the rest of your days talking about what a mean man and poor father he was, just like you did when he was alive." For people such as these, the death of an unloved one is merely an interruption in their routine, a sign which they do not fully understand.

Wendell differs from the other non-thinkers in that he is innocently simple and is the most sympathetic member of the quarrelsome Rouse family. He is to be pitied at the outcome when he is set adrift to face the gigantic problem of making up his own mind. He and Mama occupy similar positions in the thinking and non-thinking groups of characters. Each seems to give a more human element to the negative action which is dominated by the harsh and unsympathetic qualities of the others.

There is little relief in the negative tone given to the play from the beginning. During the hours before the funeral, the characters scarcely rise above themselves or show noble traits. Buell comes closest to lifting the action when he roars and curses his way through the preacher, his mother's friends, and the family itself to finally reach the side of his father's coffin.

In defense of the negative action and thought, there is consistency and irony in the portrayal of the living as compared with the peace and positiveness of the dead man in the adjoining room. Death for Bond Rouse is a thing of beauty in comparison to the life he left behind. The

glimpse into his past is given sympathetically by his friend, Everett, and unsympathetically by the women of the community, his sister-in-law, and wife. The children's views range from Mary Lou's realization that she did not know him at all to Buell's unconscious pride in being like him.

Exposition of the family's life before his death is threaded throughout the three acts rather than given in detail early in the play. The hours before a funeral provide a natural time for the family and friends to discuss the deceased and their relation to him. Another legitimate device for exposition is Mrs. Simmons, a newcomer to town. Certain information about the Rouses must be given to her, and Mrs. Simmons' own speculations are corrected from time to time by the other members of the Golden Circle Missionary Society who have lived in the town longer. Intimate details concerning the dead man and family are brought out through Mary Lou's quest for the truth, Zetta's unending prattle in defense of Alma, and the comparison drawn between the father and eldest son.

An effort was made not to force the exposition, letting it unravel with the action. For example, the significance of the emphasis Alma puts on clothes throughout the play is not revealed until minutes before the final curtain when she is saying, "I hated farming. I hated seeing Papa come in dirty every night. I wanted my kids to have clean clothes and be somebody!" Buell's inner scorn for Wendell's passiveness is linked with exposition of Wendell's wartime service when early in the third act the older brother says, "Haven't you ever been around dead people before? Oh, that's right, excuse me, you were one of those Army stateside flowers who never left your clerk-typist desk job."

The Rouse family is shown at its most dramatic and worst moment. It could not have been portrayed in such an unkindly manner before the death of the father, and it will never reach such a degrading state again. A truth has been revealed by his death. Some feel it deeply and others do not, as evidenced when Mary Lou says, "I never honestly knew we were this way. We're not a family, we're some sordid individuals who can't even pull ourselves together enough to bury a man. . . ." And Alma replies, "Those are unkind words, Mary Lou, they're words against me."

There to witness it all is the prying community which chooses a moment like this to invade privacies. Perhaps the most compassionate lines in the negative and severe treatment of the play are spoken by Lottie:

". . . Leave these people alone. We don't have any business seeing this. Get out the door, and leave them alone."

THE CHARACTERS

BUELL, 28, the late Bond Rouse's eldest son

MAMA, the deceased man's 80-year-old mother-in-law

ZETTA, 52, his sister-in-law

MARY LOU, 19, his only daughter

WENDELL, his other son, about 25 years old

ALMA, the 50-year-old wife of the deceased

EVERETT, his best friend

BROTHER PALMER, the pastor of the local Baptist church

THE GOLDEN CIRCLE MISSIONARY SOCIETY:

ELZORA, a heavy, middle-aged woman

MAUD, a sweet-faced lady in her early fifties

MRS. SIMMONS, a thin woman about 40 years old

LOTTIE, 75, a neighbor of the deceased's family

THE LODGE MEMBERS--voices

THE SCENE

ACT I

Six o'clock, Saturday evening

ACT II

Just before sunrise the next morning

ACT III

Sunday noon

All action of the play takes place in the living room of the Rouse home in the late fall of 1953 in a small Midwestern farming community some fifty miles from any sizable town.

In the living room there are wreaths of fresh and wax flowers scattered about and placed on either side of the upstage right archway which leads to the darkened dining room where the late Bond Rouse lies unseen in his coffin.

A picture of Grandpa Rouse in old-fashioned collar and string tie hangs from the flower-print papered wall over the piano upstage left of center. A picture of a sailing ship hangs downstage right between the outside door and a large ceiling-to-floor window.

The room has an unlived-in look. There are lace doilies, starched and white, on the back of the rust-colored couch downstage left. A dark mohair wing chair faces the couch and there is a small table by the chair. These pieces of furniture are nondescript.

The cloth-bottomed arm chair upstage between the arch and the piano was purchased in the 1930s. The simple desk upstage right close to

the arch is of the same vintage. There are some funeral home folding chairs stacked against the wall near the bedroom door upstage left. A large armchair upstage right between the door and window is the most used and comfortable piece in the room. There is a magazine rack, lamp, and footstool close by. Downstage left, almost apart from the room, is a rocking chair with a loud pillow on the seat.

Over the desk is suspended a knick-knack shelf for small objects and an ivy or potato plant. On the piano there are some carefully stacked sheets of music and a metronome.

The room depicts no definite period. But like the clothing worn by the characters, nothing is in poor taste, but rather non-committal.

ELLA. Ah, what up, Setta.

SETTA. Get up and get dressed before the ladies arrive.

ELLA. They can't see me looking like this, can they? What do you think? Well, you are going to wear your nice uniform to the church service tomorrow, aren't you?

ELLA. Yes, I'm going naked. I always go to funerals naked.

SETTA. Darling, after Alex worked so hard getting your clothes ready the least you could do is wear them. She moves about brushing the flowers. So many pretty flowers, aren't there? Rightfully. So many. More than poor Sanford had when he died. And he was such a good man.

ELLA. Darling. But he was only a clerk in a hardware store. You have to be a banker like Daddy to get a lot of flowers, Auntie Setta.

SETTA. You should be ashamed, Ella Rouse! Sanford was more

ACT I

Buell is sprawled on the couch with his feet upstage. His cigarette smoulders on the rug where he dropped it when he fell asleep. Mama enters from the bedroom left with her chamber pot. She pauses as she passes the couch, pats Buell's leg affectionately, and moves on to exit through archway right center. Zetta enters from front door at right.

ZETTA. Sees cigarette on floor. Buell! Buell! Wake up!

Are you trying to burn the house down? Your cigarette is on the floor!

Buell! Goes to him.

BUELL. Without moving. Well, for God's sake, put it out, Zetta.

ZETTA. Stomping on rug. I've never seen anything like you kids. Always into something. Now, you ought to get up and go put your good clothes on. Look at you. You're a sight! And you've got mud all over your mother's nice couch. She brushes at couch arm.

BUELL. Aw, shut up, Zetta.

ZETTA. Get up and get dressed before the Golden Circle ladies come. They can't see you looking like this, can they? Gets no response. Buell, you are going to wear your nice uniform to the church service tomorrow, aren't you?

BUELL. Naw, I'm going naked. I always go to funerals naked.

ZETTA. Fussing. After Alma worked so hard getting your clothes ready the least you could do is wear them. She moves about touching the flowers. So many pretty flowers, aren't there? Wistfully. So many. More than poor Sanford had when he died. And he was such a good man.

BUELL. Cruelly. But he was only a clerk in a hardware store. You have to be a banker like Daddy to get a lot of flowers, Auntie Zetta.

ZETTA. You should be ashamed, Buell Rouse! Sanford was more

of a father to you three kids than Bond ever was.

BUELL. Yeah. And when Sanford died, you said it was a shame it wasn't Daddy.

ZETTA. I didn't say any such a thing.

BUELL. Teasing. Oh, yes, you did, Zetta. Now that the old man's dead, you must feel pretty good, huh?

ZETTA. How terrible! Don't you have any respect for the dead?

BUELL. I have respect for the living, some of them, damn few of them. But the dead are dead and that's all there is to it.

ZETTA. You sound just like your daddy, that's the sort of awful thing he would say. But he never had respect for anyone, including himself.

BUELL. God, but I bet he's happy being away and out of all this. How long did he put up with it?

ZETTA. Put up with it? Bond put up with anything? I'd like to know what? Alma made the home for you kids, she did it all by herself. He never helped, you all know that.

BUELL. Maybe he didn't. Maybe he was too busy trying to find some sort of peace and quiet away from here.

ZETTA. Why, Buell, are you defending the way he always acted?

BUELL. No, I'm not defending him. No one ever has. Isn't it a little late to start now?

ZETTA. Bond Rouse never did anything for you children. Alma's done it all, and he never helped her.

BUELL. Where's all this respect for the dead you mentioned? Let's have a reverent silence.

ZETTA. At least I'm trying to help Alma out. You all aren't helping her. Why don't you go put these clean clothes on and act nice?

BUELL. Snorts. Act nice!

ZETTA. You could try.

BUELL. Sits up. First time audience sees him. I'm going out to the farm.

ZETTA. You are not! You're not going out to that dirty farm. What would everyone say?

BUELL. They'd say: Mimics. "Can you imagine? That Buell going out to the farm and his daddy dead in there?" That's what they'd say. Mother has her two favorite children at her side, so to hell with it. She doesn't need me.

ZETTA. I don't understand you, Buell. Not at all. You used to be such a sweet child, always minded. . . .

BUELL. Zetta, when you've been in the Army and through two wars real fast, you don't stay sweet and you don't stay a child. Sorry. I'm a big boy now.

ZETTA. You could at least behave yourself when you come home. Now get up and get dressed. The ladies. . . .

BUELL. The ladies from the church don't have a damn bit of business sitting up here all night, and neither does that lodge outfit Daddy belonged to.

ZETTA. They always do, and your mother is a big member of the Golden Circle Missionary Society.

BUELL. So they come in and sit up and try to think of nice things to say about her late husband. . . .

ZETTA. . . . They're her good friends. . .

BUELL. . . . At least the lodge hall crowd has a roaring good time when they sit up.

ZETTA. They'll have to stay outside, those men will. They drink and carry on awful. You just stay away from them, Buell. You can't embarrass your mother at a time like this.

BUELL. At a time like this! What kind of time is this, Zetta? He's dead and we're going to put him in the ground tomorrow. Then you and Mother can sit out on the porch the rest of your days talking about what a mean man and poor father he was, just like you did when he was alive.

ZETTA. It would break her heart if she heard you say that. She's so upset, don't you understand, Buell? Wendell and Mary Lou have been good to her and you. . .you don't even try.

Mama enters from arch carrying pot. She heads for bedroom door.

BUELL. Zetta, sometimes you make me sick.

ZETTA. You've got no right to talk to me like that. . . Sees Mama. Mama! You can't be carrying that pot through here!

MAMA. Stops, looks pleasantly at Zetta. I had to empty it. It stinks.

ZETTA. I don't see why you can't use the bathroom like the rest of us.

MAMA. Because it's cold and lonely in there.

ZETTA. Oh, Mama! Look, why don't you go across the street to my house and stay until the funeral's over? You can sleep in the front bedroom and work your crossword puzzles and have a good time.

MAMA. Moves on past couch. Brushes Buell's hair with her hand and goes on to exit bedroom. Because, to tell the truth, Zetta, I don't want to.

ZETTA. Poor Alma, poor, poor Alma. She wants everything to be nice and go right for the funeral and no one's helping her out but me.

BUELL. Yeah. You're a great help, Zetta. Stands and stretches. Where's Wendell?

ZETTA. You leave that child alone. He's not going out to that farm and drink.

BUELL. Laughs. Who said anything about drinking?

ZETTA. You always do. Just this one time you're home, can't you think of your mother? These last few days have almost driven her out of her mind. You're not going to be here long, Buell, can't you be a good boy for her sake?

BUELL. For my sake, can't you hush up? If you yap at Mother all day like this, I can see why she's nearly out of her mind.

ZETTA. Mad. How dare you? How dare you talk like that when I'm the only one. . .

BUELL. Shouting. I know, I know, you're the only one here who helps her! You're her ever-loving sister and you help her so much no one else gets a chance.

Wendell and Mary Lou enter from front door.

MARY LOU. What's wrong?

BUELL. Here they are! The heirs to the throne.

WENDELL. Pleasantly. What's going on?

ZETTA. Nothing's wrong, Wendell, honey. Buell has a temper worse than his daddy's, that's all.

MARY LOU. Moves upstage to piano. Oh, Zetta.

ZETTA. He does, I swear he does. And look at him, he isn't even dressed.

BUELL. Want to drive out to the farm with me, Wendell?

WENDELL. Gee, maybe we'd better not. Nods toward arch. With Daddy in there and all. . .you know. . .

BUELL. Okay. If you'd rather sit around with the Golden Circle Missionary Society, that's up to you.

WENDELL. You know I hadn't, but Mother said she wanted us here.

BUELL. What for?

MARY LOU. Someone has to be around, Buell. If you want to go out, Wendell and I will stay with her.

BUELL. Sarcastically. Well, that's real decent of you, little sister. But maybe Wendell wants to go with me. What about it, Wendell? Make up your mind.

WENDELL. Gosh, I don't know, Buell.

BUELL. Make up your mind, you staying or going?

ZETTA. No one's going anywhere. Buell, you've got to get dressed and be here when the people come.

BUELL. Ignoring her. Come on, Wendell, let's get out of here for fresh air.

Buell goes to outside door, opens it and waits for Wendell.

MARY LOU. Wendell, one of you fellows should be here when the people come in.

BUELL. Aw, come on, Wendell, the college co-ed can hold down the fort. What's she getting all this education for if she can't meet the people and be proper?

WENDELL. Moves toward door. We won't be gone long. It would be good to get away for a little while.

BUELL. Feeling in pocket. Wait a minute. I've got some car keys.

Buell exits archway.

MARY LOU. Wendell, do you think you ought to leave Mother right now?

ZETTA. He certainly shouldn't.

WENDELL. Honestly, I thought I'd go along in case Buell. . . in case he starts. . .

ZETTA. Drinking! Oh, Alma will die if he goes out and gets drunk.

WENDELL. He's not going to, for pete's sake, Zetta. What do you think he is anyway?

ZETTA. I think he's a Rouse.

MARY LOU. Zetta, please, just for once, I wish you'd leave everything that has been where it belongs. Daddy's in there dead and in his coffin. I don't like hearing you run down. . .

ZETTA. Quickly. Oh, I'm not running him down. Far be it from me not to respect the dead no matter what they did when they were living. But the boy is the spitting image of Bond, isn't he? Even the hair, the way it won't lay down and the voice. . .

MARY LOU. I don't know. I've about decided I didn't know Daddy at

all. And I know Buell even less. Let's just drop it.

WENDELL. Sits right. Yeah, Zetta, I don't feel much like talking either.

ZETTA. We're all on edge, that's what we are. But it's natural to be upset when there's a death. I'm just glad Alma has you two kids to depend on. I don't suppose we can really blame Buell for being like he is. He's been away for so long, and I guess the Army is the only place for him. He's miserable when he visits here. Isn't he, Wendell?

WENDELL. Hasn't been listening to her. What, Zetta? Oh, sure, I guess so.

There is a "tap-tap-tap" on the right front door. The Golden Circle Missionary Society enters quietly, carrying covered dishes. They file in, tiptoeing followed by the preacher. Elzora leads, then Maud, Mrs. Simmons, with Lottie last. They pass by Zetta, some patting her, some kissing, and all nod or wave toward Mary Lou and Wendell as they file out through archway, leaving the preacher behind. He goes to Wendell. Puts hand on his shoulder.

PREACHER. How's everyone holding up?

ZETTA. Alma's across the street at my house lying down, Brother Palmer. She's so nervous and upset.

PREACHER. I know. She must get some rest.

ZETTA. I'll go get her. She'll want to talk to you. Rises.

PREACHER. She may be asleep. Sleep comes so hard in times like these, we shouldn't disturb her.

ZETTA. It's all right, I know she wants to see you. She asked me to come get her when you came. Exits front door.

PREACHER. This is the time hardest of all on folks. How are you children doing?

WENDELL. Uncomfortably. All right, thanks, Brother Palmer.

PREACHER. It's good she has you and Mary Lou to lean on, Wendell. At a time like this there's nothing that can replace the children's devotion for their mother.

WENDELL. Stands, moves toward arch. That's right, I guess I'd better find Buell and tell him everyone's here. Exits.

PREACHER. It's nice Buell could come home, Mary Lou. How long's it been since he was here?

MARY LOU. More than a year, Brother Palmer.

PREACHER. It's a shame such a sad occasion brings him home. I know his heart must be heavy, his being the eldest son and all.

MARY LOU. Strokes piano keys. Yes, sir.

PREACHER. I suppose you'll be staying at home with your mother now, Mary Lou. Just want you to know we'll sure have a spot for you in the Sunday school, playing the piano.

MARY LOU. Thank you.

PREACHER. About time you found some nice man and settled down here. Too bad you have to leave college where you did so well with your music, but there's nothing wrong with your bringing your talents back to your home town and putting them to good use in the church. We need more like you around here.

MARY LOU. Uncomfortable. Yes, sir.

PREACHER. What a blessing it will be for your mother, too. She's very proud of her only daughter who plays the piano so well.

MARY LOU. Yes, sir. I wonder if you'd excuse me, Brother Palmer? I'd like to see how my grandmother's getting along.

PREACHER. Why, certainly. You're a thoughtful granddaughter, Mary Lou.

Mary Lou exits quietly to bedroom. For a few seconds the preacher walks about the living room appraising it and the wreaths. The ladies enter and sit about on chairs and the couch left stage. The preacher is near the arch upstage.

MAUD. Well. They sure did a good job on Bond Rouse. Have you seen him, Brother Palmer?

PREACHER. Of course. I was over at the funeral home when they finished with him.

MRS. SIMMONS. Mrs. Rouse picked out a pretty casket, didn't she? She seems to have awful good taste.

ELZORA. She can afford it. Alma's a banker's widow now. I wonder what they'll do with the bank?

LOTTIE. I don't think it's any of our concern what they do with the bank, especially right now. We're here to sit up with the dead, not talk about his business affairs.

ELZORA. Huh! I think it's some of our concern. We've all got money in that bank.

PREACHER. Of course, but it'd be more fitting not to discuss it right now.

MAUD. I didn't want to discuss it, Brother Palmer. I was just wondering what they were going to do with it.

MRS. SIMMONS. Maybe the two sons will run it.

ELZORA. God, forbid! Mrs. Simmons, you haven't been in this town long enough to know about. . .

LOTTIE. Disgusted. Honestly, Elzora! Stands. I'm going to see how Alma's mother is bearing up. Exits bedroom.

ELZORA. Well!

MRS. SIMMONS. They sure have nice furniture.

ELZORA. And he didn't buy a stick of it. I heard Alma paid for everything off that 60-acre farm her father left them.

MRS. SIMMONS. Imagine having a bank and a farm both!

ELZORA. I remember when Alma and Zetta didn't even have a farm. Their father was paying for it, bit by bit.

MRS. SIMMONS. Well, she's got a bank now.

MAUD. Ladies, I imagine she's earned it.

ELZORA. It's not so grand. The farm was left to her and Zetta together. They hated the farm when we were all kids and they had to live on it. They were farmer's kids. But that bank's been in the Rouse family for years and years.

Buell followed by Wendell comes to archway.

MRS. SIMMONS. The brothers might run it.

ELZORA. Those two boys couldn't manage it. If they tried I think I'd take my money across the state line.

MAUD. Oh, don't be so hard on Alma's boys, Elzora.

PREACHER. Friends, I don't think we ought to be talking about these matters. . .

Buell comes through arch, glaring at Elzora who tries to smile.

BUELL. You're exactly right, Brother Palmer. This is a time of sorrow.

PREACHER. Why, here's Buell. I haven't had a chance to see you since you got in, my boy, but I want you to know you have my deepest sympathy on the loss of your father.

BUELL. Playing the part. I appreciate that, Brother Palmer.
Don't you appreciate that, Wendell?

WENDELL. Sensing approaching storm. Yeah, I sure do. We all do.
Buell and I were just on our way out to look over some things at the farm,
Brother Palmer. You ready, Buell? Moves to door.

BUELL. In just a second. I always enjoy seeing Mother's good
friends.

MAUD. Nice you could come home, Buell.

Mrs. Simmons. What rank're you in the Army now?

BUELL. I'm a sergeant.

ELZORA. Blunders, then laughs nervously. Still a sergeant?

BUELL. Deadly. A top sergeant, Mrs. Potter.

ELZORA. That's nice. I mean, you're moving right along, aren't
you? Who knows, you may be a general some day.

BUELL. I don't think I'll be around the Army that long.

MRS. SIMMONS. I suppose you get used to it.

MAUD. Well, I never thought you'd turn out to be an Army man,
Buell. When you were little, you used to say you were going to grow
flowers.

BUELL. That was when I was little. Sergeants just don't grow
flowers, do they?

WENDELL. We'd better go on out, Buell.

PREACHER. Now you boys know we're here. We'll help out all we can.

MRS. SIMMONS. We brought supper for everyone.

WENDELL. Thanks a lot. We'll be back pretty soon.

MAUD. We'll tell your mother.

Wendell is holding door open. Buell stands near it with hands in pockets, eyeing Elzora.

BUELL. Sweetly. Just can't tell you how much we appreciate all you're doing, Mrs. Potter.

ELZORA. We're here to help.

WENDELL. Gives a tug at Buell's shirt. Well, bye. Wendell exits.

BUELL. Thanks again for being with us in this time of sorrow. I'll be back. Exits.

Group is silent for a moment.

MRS. SIMMONS. Isn't he a sweet boy?

MAUD. I thought he acted peculiar, not a bit like himself. Do you suppose he overheard you talking, Elzora?

MRS. SIMMONS. Wouldn't that have been terrible?

ELZORA. I hate it if they heard, but everything I said was the truth. You all know that.

MAUD. I just feel sorry for Alma. She's a good woman and she's always had troubles.

PREACHER. Yes, she always comes to church, but she never asks for any help.

ELZORA. I've tried to feel sorry for Alma, but she brought her troubles on herself. She wouldn't have a son like that if she hadn't married Bond Rouse. We all know Bond drank before they married, but Alma wouldn't listen to us. She couldn't see anything but being a banker's wife. She could have married my brother Harmon. He would've made her a fine husband.

MAUD. It's funny how when you're young and growing up together,

you never know how things will turn out.

ELZORA. I could've guessed all this for Alma back then. . .the way Bond would end up.

MRS. SIMMONS. But he's dead now.

ELZORA. Sharply. I know that, Mrs. Simmons. Softening. I don't mean to sound hard, but Alma and Zetta and I have been friends since we were little. We used to play dolls together. I couldn't talk so freely this way if we weren't such good friends.

PREACHER. They're a strange family, I'll admit, but we folks must do everything we can to help them out, especially right now.

MAUD. That's right, preacher.

ELZORA. Do you think Buell was drinking? Of course, it wouldn't be unusual, would it?

PREACHER. I don't think we should say unkind things.

ELZORA. Snapping. Brother Palmer, since you're preaching to us live ones so hard, have you thought of anything good to say about the dead?

PREACHER. Why, Elzora Potter!

ELZORA. What are you going to say? He never went to church. He and that Everett Shaw drank the days away, up at the bank, the lodge hall.

PREACHER. Roused. Elzora, I'm going to have to insist you stop this kind of talk.

MAUD. I don't like it either, Elzora. We're here because we're Alma's best and oldest friends. Doesn't seem right to talk this way when he's lying in that room dead.

ELZORA. The truth is the truth.

PREACHER. And there's a time and place for everything.

Loud guffaws come from outside.

MRS. SIMMONS. Must be the lodge members.

ELZORA. And they'll be drinking all night long. Preacher, why don't you go tell them, "There's a time and place for everything?"

PREACHER. Exasperated. Now, Elzora. Mrs. Potter, really. . .

ELZORA. They've got their nerve, coming here to sit up. I wouldn't allow them on my property.

MAUD. Well, Elzora, they've got a right to come mourn Bond. He was a big man in the lodge. They always come around to pay respects when. . .

MRS. SIMMONS. Listen! They've gotten awful quiet.

All pause to 'listen'. The outside door opens quietly. Enter Zetta who stands holding the door open for Alma. Alma, dressed in black, enters. Everyone stands. After the preacher silently clasps her hand and backs off, the ladies one by one go kiss her and stand in a circle about her.

MAUD. Alma, we know what you're going through and we want to do everything we can to help you.

MRS. SIMMONS. Supper's all taken care of, Mrs. Rouse.

PREACHER. You have to depend on your friends at a time like this. Elzora takes Alma by the hand and leads her to the couch where they sit.

ELZORA. Here, Alma, come sit down. You look so tired and thin. Haven't you lost weight? Small wonder. Such an ordeal. But you keep your chin up and know we're all right here with you for better or worse.

ALMA. Looking at each person. Have you all seen him?

MRS. SIMMONS. He certainly looks nice.

MAUD. Looks just like he's asleep.

ELZORA. They did a grand job.

All murmur and nod approval.

ALMA. Doesn't seem like Bond. So quiet and still in there.

ZETTA. Have the boys gone out?

PREACHER. They said they'd be back in a little while. I think a little fresh air will do them good. Can't coop up boys, you know. They get restless.

Lottie opens bedroom door. Sees Alma and goes to sit by her. Alma breaks down and quietly cries. The ladies sit right stage leaving the Preacher by the arch standing, and Zetta by the door.

LOTTIE. Sincerely. Bless your heart, Alma, what can I do?

ALMA. He wasn't sick very long, was he? Just three days and he was gone. Never sick a day in his life till he had this stroke.

MAUD. You're lucky you've got all the children home, Alma. They're a lot of help at a time like this, especially the girl.

Loud laughter from Lodge member.

ALMA. The lodge members are out there. They shook my hand when I came in. Everett told me they were going to wear their lambskin aprons at the graveside service tomorrow.

PREACHER. That would have pleased your husband.

ALMA. Yes, he was real active in the lodge. Went about as high as you could go.

MAUD. I heard Everett's taking it pretty hard, his being Bond's best friend and all.

ALMA. It was an awful blow to him. He took Bond to the doctor when he had the stroke at the bank.

ELZORA. We heard they were together when it happened.

Awkward silence.

MRS. SIMMONS. Your dress looks nice, Alma.

ZETTA. We ordered it special.

Another silence. Mary Lou enters from bedroom.

MARY LOU. How do you feel, Mother?

ZETTA. Go sit by your mother, Mary Lou.

Mary Lou goes behind couch. Alma reaches up and takes her hand.

PREACHER. You've got a fine daughter there to take care of you.

ALMA. I don't know what I'd do without her here.

MRS. SIMMONS. I hear you play the piano real well, Mary Lou.

MARY LOU. Thank you, Mrs. Simmons.

Silence again.

LOTTIE. Rising. I think we all ought to go to the kitchen and get this supper ready.

MAUD. Rising. You just sit still, Alma. We'll take care of it.

ELZORA. Yes. I know where everything is out there.

Elzora goes softly through the arch after Mrs. Simmons, Lottie, and Maud.

PREACHER. Mrs. Rouse, I still need some information on the deceased. I'd planned a short sermon and we'll have prayer, but I need to check some things on Mr. Rouse's background. I know it's painful for you, but we can't neglect these details.

ALMA. No. It's all right, Brother Palmer. We have to be strong at times like these.

PREACHER. Referring to notebook. What year was he born and where?

ALMA. It was. . .let's see. Thinks. It was 1902, and he was born here in town in the old Rouse home that was torn down when they put the new road through.

PREACHER. And he attended the public schools here?

ALMA. Yes.

ZETTA. They called it the "academy" back then.

PREACHER. And he graduated? Writes in book.

ALMA. First in his class. The day after graduation he went to work for his father. He was in the bank for some 30 years, Brother Palmer.

PREACHER. A long time. And he did lodge work for about the same length of time, didn't he?

ZETTA. Yes, he did, but we don't know what all offices he held.

ALMA. He went about as high as you could go though. You'll have to ask some of the lodge members about that.

PREACHER. All right. Now, survivors. He's survived by his wife whom he married in. . .

ALMA. In 1924.

PREACHER. There're two sons, one daughter, and a sister in Texas.

ZETTA. She's not coming to the funeral.

PREACHER. I heard she couldn't make it. Now, then. Mrs. Rouse, we'll have to decide about the music. We've let these details slip up on us.

ALMA. Brother Palmer, could we wait till later? I'm so tired.

ZETTA. She is worn out.

PREACHER. Closes book. All right. I'll be around anyway until the boys come back.

ALMA. Yes, there should be a man in the house. I'd appreciate it if you stayed while they're gone.

PREACHER. All right. If you need anything at all, call me. I'll be out with the ladies. He exits archway.

Mary Lou has sat on piano bench. Zetta waits till the preacher exits before rushing to look out right stage window.

ALMA. Zetta, get away from the window. Those men will see you peeking out.

ZETTA. I just wish he'd left Wendell alone. Wendell's a good boy till Buell comes home.

ALMA. They both should be here with me.

MARY LOU. They won't be gone long, Mother.

ALMA. Zetta said Buell was drinking. Was he?

MARY LOU. I don't know.

ZETTA. He had the rug on fire when I came in.

ALMA. What makes him act like that?

ZETTA. It must be in his blood. I can't think of any other reason.

Mary Lou plunks piano keys.

ZETTA. Mary Lou, stop that!

MARY LOU. But all I did was. . .

ZETTA. You can't play the piano with all those people out there in the kitchen. What'll they think?

ALMA. Leave the child alone, Zetta.

ZETTA. Do you want her to be playing that piano?

ALMA. She's not making any noise they can hear.

ZETTA. Hurt. I'm just trying to help you, Alma.

ALMA. Mary Lou? Come over and sit by me. Mary Lou goes to

couch and sits. It's going to be different around here now, I guess. But I have you and Wendell. I'm luckier than most.

ZETTA. You sure are, Alma. Look at me. I didn't have anyone. . .

ALMA. Oh, now, Zetta, that's not true. My kids have been over at your house as much as they've been here. You can't tell which house they belong in. Bond said so himself lots of times.

ZETTA. I still say you have a lot to be thankful for. Plenty of women lose their husbands, but not many have a bank and three kids left.

ALMA. I wonder why those boys don't come back.

ZETTA. Continuing. And I think you'll find a little peace now. It's awful to say but he made life a living hell for you, Alma.

ALMA. Was your life so good, Zetta?

ZETTA. Softly. Sanford was so good to me. From the day we married till he died, he was nothing but good; and he did nothing but good for others. You could never miss Bond like I miss him. He was everything I could ever want in a person, and he left me so soon.

ALMA. Everyone wants something different, Zetta. You never understood that, though. I remember how you felt when I married Bond.

ZETTA. And wasn't I right? Haven't you been in hell? Hasn't it been a living hell?

MARY LOU. Zetta, stop it. Mother's upset enough. Please.

ALMA. I can't deny what she says, Mary Lou. You know what your father was, but I suppose we'll miss him more than we know. He always was up early and had the house warm in the winter, and he had the coffee going in the morning. I don't like seeing him in there so quiet and heavy looking. It scares me a little. It's like he was waiting for

something.

MARY LOU. Don't talk about it, Mother. Goes back to piano. All my life I've just heard what my father was. I've never known for myself. Now he's dead and I look at him in there and he doesn't look so bad. He looks tired and like a stranger.

ZETTA. You don't know the half of it, young lady. You don't know what your mother. . .

ALMA. Stop, Zetta.

MARY LOU. I never knew what a funny family we were until I went away to college. It was the first time I'd really been away from home.

ZETTA. There's nothing funny about it. You go off to college for two years and come home telling us we're funny. After all. . .

MARY LOU. Don't say it. I know. "After all we've done for you." But you know, I've met kids at school that had more done for them, and it cost less money.

ALMA. I've spent a lot of money on you, Mary Lou, an awful lot.

ZETTA. Her own money, too, might I add.

MARY LOU. I appreciate your sending me to school. You know that. I've found so many things I never knew existed. People I never knew existed. So much. And the music. . . Absently plays scale.

ZETTA. Stop that.

ALMA. Why don't you go change clothes, Mary Lou? That dress looks awful.

ZETTA. It's down-right dirty.

MARY LOU. It's comfortable.

ALMA. I wish you'd wear the things I pick out for you.

MARY LOU. I don't like ruffles and that sort of thing. I never did.

ZETTA. When you were little you had this cute little ruffled dress. . .

MARY LOU. And I hated it. I just didn't know how to get out of wearing it.

ALMA. And you've learned how now?

MARY LOU. Yes, Mother, by saying simply I won't wear it.

ALMA. If you'd wear what I say, you'd look better.

ZETTA. I just wish she looked clean.

MARY LOU. I am clean, but I'm not going to dress up like a fashion horse, if that's what you mean.

ZETTA. You could wear what would please your mother. . .

MARY LOU. Dammit, Zetta, leave me alone! Hits piano keys.

ALMA. Admonishing. Oh, oh, oh!

ZETTA. Never talked that way till she went to that college. I told you all along it was a mistake leaving her in school for more than a year.

ALMA. Let her alone, Zetta. She'll be home with us from now on. And she'll be our good little girl.

MARY LOU. Oh, Mother. . . Can't you realize I'm almost. . .

ZETTA. Almost grown? Huh, what do you know about life?

ALMA. You'd be a pretty girl, too, if you'd wear what I tell you.

Mama appears at bedroom door.

MARY LOU. Sits dejected at piano. But I don't want to be a little girl, a pretty little girl.

MAMA. Someone playing the piano?

MARY LOU. Got any requests?

MAMA. Well, "Sweet Hour of Prayer" is nice.

ZETTA. Mama! She can't play that piano now. We just got through telling her to leave it alone.

ALMA. Mama, why don't you put that nice lavender dress on? Please do if you're going to come out here. You look awful.

MAMA. I feel pretty good.

MARY LOU. Laughs. I think you look fine.

ALMA. Rises. Come on, Zetta, let's straighten up her room real quick while the ladies are out there.

ZETTA. Let me. You rest, Alma.

ALMA. No, you're so slow, I'll help. Come on.

They move toward the bedroom.

MAMA. There's nothing wrong with my room.

ZETTA. To Alma. I'll bet her false teeth are in a glass of water out on the kitchen sink where everyone will see.

MAMA. Clicks teeth loudly. They are not! They're right here in my mouth.

Alma and Zetta exit.

MARY LOU. I can one-finger Sweet Hour of Prayer real softly, Mama.

Mama goes to stand by the piano as Mary Lou plays. After few seconds she pats her on the head and goes to sit on the couch.

MAMA. That's enough. It sounds pretty, but we don't want to upset your mother. Where is everyone? Lottie said the place was swarming.

MARY LOU. The lodge is outside, I guess, and the women and the preacher are outside in the kitchen.

MAMA. People always come around.

MARY LOU. Mocking. It's because of our position, of course. After all we do own a bank now. The family of Bond Rouse now owns the one bank in town. It would be more impressive if there were more than three thousand people, but it's still the only bank in town. What makes it ironical is that there's not a banker among us.

MAMA. Lottie said the ladies have been speculating what would happen to the bank.

MARY LOU. Gossip would be a better word.

MAMA. Lottie doesn't gossip.

MARY LOU. Maybe she doesn't, but the others do. They sit around trying to think out the rest of our lives. And it's none of their business, Mama, is it?

MAMA. They're just interested.

MARY LOU. No, it's more than that. No one cares that there's a man dead in there. They're still alive and that's all that counts.

MAMA. You're too hard on them. They're just trying to help.

MARY LOU. I'm beginning to doubt it. I keep looking for. . . for someone who's mourning, and I don't see anyone.

MAMA. I don't want to talk like this. I'm old. I'm ready to die, but I see friends around me. I've been in this town for eighty years, and it's always been the same. It doesn't seem to change. Just like this family, and there's nothing much you can do about it.

MARY LOU. Unless you can do "without it." Didn't you ever want to leave, Mama, get out of here?

MAMA. What I've wanted is gone. It's back there, way long ago somewhere.

MARY LOU. But you've lived so long. Don't you think about. . .

MAMA. I think about right now, Mary Lou, like you ought to. Lottie's going to bring me some Mimosa tree seedlings. Do you think they'll grow on the north side of the house?

MARY LOU. Didn't you ever, in all these years, want something different, better?

MAMA. Working puzzle. Buell promised to plant them for me. He's good at working the earth.

MARY LOU. Aren't you going to talk to me about this?

MAMA. Looks up from crossword puzzle. There's nothing for me to say.

Door knock. Everett slips in.

EVERETT. I hate to bother Alma, but I need to see her.

MARY LOU. Hi, Everett.

EVERETT. Hi, Mary Lou. How do you feel. To Mama.

MAMA. All right. Come on in, Everett. Alma's in the other room.

EVERETT. I went through his things at the bank like she said. She didn't want to do it. There're his books and shortwave radio and his lodge material and some clothes. I don't know what to do with all of it. I've got it out in the car. All the things he cared about.

MARY LOU. I'll go call Mother, Everett.

MAMA. Rising. No, I'll get her. They've been pestering around in my room long enough. I want to lie down.

She grumbles as she crosses to bedroom and exits.

MARY LOU. I guess the boys will want a lot of Daddy's things.

EVERETT. Mary Lou, I found this and thought you might like it.

MARY LOU. Taking small book from him. What is it?

EVERETT. His New Testament.

MARY LOU. A Bible!

EVERETT. Yeah.

MARY LOU. I didn't know he had one.

EVERETT. He liked the stories.

MARY LOU. Do you read the Bible, Everett?

EVERETT. No. But Bond used to tell me some of the stories. He could really tell a story, knew just how to do it. Some afternoons after he closed up the bank he'd talk. You'd think he'd been all over the world. He knew everything about countries away off and when he'd talk, you'd think you were there.

MARY LOU. Why don't you sit down, Everett?

EVERETT. Where is he?

MARY LOU. Nods toward arch. In there. Have you seen him?

EVERETT. No. And I don't want to. I think I'd be embarrassed. I think it'd embarrass him. He wouldn't like it at all.

MARY LOU. You miss him, don't you, Everett? You really honest-to-God miss him?

Everett nods.

MARY LOU. I don't think there's anyone else here who could say the same.

EVERETT. Not many people knew him, Mary Lou.

MARY LOU. But you did.

EVERETT. A little. He was a lot smarter than me, Mary Lou. I

couldn't talk about some of the things he did. He was real smart.

MARY LOU. He never talked around home. What did he talk about up there, Everett?

EVERETT. Oh, I don't know. The crops, things he'd heard the farmers say, business, you kids. He had pictures of the three of you when you were little. They're in with his things I brought over. He talked a lot about you all. A lot about Buell.

MARY LOU. What did he say?

EVERETT. All that was back before Buell went in the Army. 'Course Bond was planning on him taking over the bank, his being the eldest and all. After he went in the Army, Bond didn't mention it again. Then he let Wendell come to work there.

MARY LOU. Did he ever mention me? Up there?

EVERETT. Lots of times. He was real proud of you being in college. He always wanted to go to college, but he didn't get to because of the bank. And he was proud of you playing the piano.

MARY LOU. He never listened. . . I didn't think he ever listened. He never said much.

EVERETT. Maybe he didn't get much of a chance to say anything. . .

MARY LOU. . . And in the evenings when he came home drunk. . .

EVERETT. Your mother had put out some cheese and crackers on the kitchen table for him and took you kids over to Zetta's to eat.

MARY LOU. Are you blaming my mother?

EVERETT. Partly. It was everyone's fault. I don't know. It was his fault, too. He hated this town. I always thought he hated it.

MARY LOU. I didn't know him at all, Everett, not at all.

EVERETT. No, I don't suppose you did.

MARY LOU. Or ever will now.

Alma enters from bedroom, followed by Zetta.

ALMA. Mama said you wanted to talk to me, Everett.

She sits on douch. Everett is by front door in chair. Zetta sits on piano bench with Mary Lou.

EVERETT. Yes. I got Bond's things from the back room at the bank. It's all out in the car. The boys will want a lot of it, I guess.

ALMA. I want to go through it first. What did he have up there, Everett?

EVERETT. The things he used a lot. Some of his clothes, too, might fit the boys. Where are they?

ALMA. They drove out to the farm. And I wish they would come on home.

ZETTA. If you ask me, they're out there drinking. I just don't know what we'd do if Mary Lou ever started drinking, after Bond and the boys. I'd die if she did.

EVERETT. Now a drink never hurt. . . .

ZETTA. Never hurt? Never hurt, is that what you were going to say? Look in there and you'll see how much it hurt, Everett Shaw.

ALMA. Zetta, don't get worked up. Everett's trying to help us. Was there anything else up there, Everett?

EVERETT. No will, 'course, like you know. But there is an insurance policy for \$5,000.

ALMA. Cautiously. Who's it made out to?

EVERETT. Bond's sister in Texas.

ALMA. Bond's sister?

ZETTA. Might have known. That woman. Not even coming to the funeral. Probably knew she'd have the money whether she came or not.

ALMA. Well, I'm not really surprised. That's just like Bond. Leaving it to an outsider and denying his own family.

MARY LOU. For gosh sakes, Mother, you've got the whole bank. This is just an insurance policy.

EVERETT. Rises. I think I'll be getting along. Let me know if I can help you, folks.

ALMA. Are you sure he left it to her?

EVERETT. She's the only one of his sisters and brothers left, Alma.

ZETTA. And she's not even coming to the funeral.

Enter Maud and Elzora, sizing up the scene.

MAUD. In a whisper. Supper's ready, Alma.

ELZORA. Coldly. Hello, Everett. Everett nods at her.

ALMA. Rising. Ladies, I'm not a bit hungry. I think I'll go over to Zetta's and lie down a bit.

ZETTA. Rising. Mary Lou and I will go with you, Alma.

MARY LOU. Why do I have to go, too?

ZETTA. Come on. Your mother needs you. They exit door.

MAUD. As they leave. We'll keep supper warm for you.

ELZORA. Alma sure was upset. Sounds like they're going off for a family conference. Everett, did you bring bad news?

EVERETT. It's their business and none of yours, Elzora Potter.

ELZORA. Well! Aren't we smart! You can just come off your high horse, Everett. We all know you. And that bank's community business, don't forget.

EVERETT. Can't you wait till he's at least buried?

ELZORA. I'm a friend of the family and I want to know what they're going to do with that bank. We've all got money in it. Have you, Everett?

EVERETT. Mad. It's none of your business.

ELZORA. Bond might have been a good banker, but those two boys can't take it over. They'd drink on the job. . . .

EVERETT. Bond never touched a drop on the job!

ELZORA. But the boys would.

MAUD. They're not very dependable, Everett. Everyone knows that.

EVERETT. Ask Alma what they're going to do. Can't you understand I don't know?

MAUD. We couldn't mention it to Alma, Everett. She's in mourning.

EVERETT. In mourning?

MAUD. Of course she is at a time like this.

EVERETT. Laughs weakly. That's right. I'd forgotten.

MAUD. Aside to Elzora. Has he been drinking?

EVERETT. No! I am not drinking. I wish I were drinking. I just don't know anything about the bank. It's been in the Rouse family for a long, long time, but who knows what's going to happen now?

ELZORA. Going to sit left. It's been in the family too long. It's outlasted the people who could run it. I think it's high time they sold it.

EVERETT. Formally. Mrs. Potter, does Mr. Potter, the groceryman,

have a hankering to own a bank?

ELZORA. Flustered. I don't know what you're talking about.

EVERETT. Didn't he try to buy into the bank about ten years ago?
And didn't Bond laugh right in his face?

MAUD. Why, Elzora, I didn't know that.

EVERETT. And didn't Bond tell him to stick to his eggs and lettuce
and Clorox and cans and apron?

ELZORA. You don't know what you're talking about. . . .

EVERETT. Bond told me lots of things. If I were you I'd keep
quiet and leave these people in peace to make up their own minds.

ELZORA. Furious. Everett Shaw, I've known you all your life and
you're nothing. . . . You thought you were something because you hung
around the bank all the time, but we laughed at you!

EVERETT. Opening door. Well, I'm laughing at you now. . . . I've
got some fine things to remember, and you've got nothing but your money to
worry about. Bond would love to see this. I hope he's proud of me. Exits.

ELZORA. A drunkard. That's all he is, that Everett Shaw. A no-
good drunkard. He's got no right to talk to me like that.

MAUD. Elzora, please calm down. Lower your voice.

ELZORA. How dare he? How dare that Everett Shaw talk like that
to me. The nerve. . . .

MAUD. Leading her through arch. There, there, everyone's up-
set. You mustn't take on like this now. Not here. Now, now, Elzora,
let's eat our supper. You'll feel better. . . .

They exit arch.

CURTAIN

ACT II

At the curtain Mary Lou is sprawled on the couch similar to Buell's position at opening of Act. I. The front door opens slowly and Buell puts his head in and looks around the room. Seeing Mary Lou asleep, he tiptoes in, closes the door, and holds onto it a moment to steady himself. He goes carefully to the couch, gets down on his hands and knees, and pulls a pint of whisky from beneath it. Buell looks up, his eyes on the level of Mary Lou who has turned her head to look in his face.

MARY LOU. What are you doing?

BUELL. What the hell's it to you?

MARY LOU. You couldn't be praying.

BUELL. Rising unsteadily, puts pint in hip pocket. Yeah, sure.

I was throwing myself at your feet and praying to you, little God. Sister worship, they call it.

MARY LOU. Why don't you call it a night and stop drinking?

BUELL. Why don't you go drop dead somewhere?

Buell walks toward the door. Mary Lou sits up, lights a cigarette.

MARY LOU. Buell?

BUELL. Turning. What?

MARY LOU. Want a cigarette?

BUELL. Yeah.

She throws him one. He lights it.

BUELL. You'd better watch out. Someone will catch you smoking. You don't want your good name soiled, you know.

MARY LOU. What've you done with Wendell?

BUELL. He's out in the car.

MARY LOU. Are you going out again?

BUELL. To another world, far, far from here.

MARY LOU. Well, leave Wendell here.

BUELL. Taking him with me. He's been with the women folks too long. It's broken his spirit. He needs a man to guide him.

MARY LOU. Are you trying to talk Wendell into something, Buell?

BUELL. Who, me? What could I talk Wendell into? Whoever has plans around here? I'm just a sergeant, that's all. And I'm tired of the Army, you know that? Sick of it. Wendell would make a better sergeant than I do. And that's pretty pitiful, huh? After ten years in the Army I'm not even a good sergeant.

MARY LOU. You're getting drunk.

BUELL. How'd you guess? Oh, excuse me! You didn't guess. You're in college. You know everything.

MARY LOU. Don't get off on that college-kick again. There's the door. You were on your way out.

BUELL. How is college Mary Lou? You a concert pianist yet? Think you ever will be? That's a mighty high calling for a small-town girl.

MARY LOU. Biting at bait. I never said anything about being a concert pianist. I just want to play the piano. . . I like music. I'm majoring in music.

BUELL. Excuse me. Didn't have any idea you'd gone so far.

MARY LOU. Leave me alone.

BUELL. It's a real shame about you. All these big ideas and now. . . Well, you can always have your dreams, sitting out there on the front porch with Mother and Zetta. "Your mother will need you now," end-quote Zetta.

MARY LOU. You're crude when you've been drinking.

BUELL. So was the old man. I came by it honestly. Do you remember the night he came home drunk and Mother bitched at him so much about

having your dog vaccinated, he took the pistol and shot the dog in the head? Laughs.

MARY LOU. He didn't know what he was doing.

BUELL. And he never got you another dog, did he?

MARY LOU. I didn't want another dog. That was my dog. Buell, can't you leave me alone? Don't come in the house now of all times. . . . you've got some common decency. He's in there. He's in there dead, you know that.

BUELL. Now don't go crying. You'd break a record in this house. No one cries. This is the driest funeral in the history of this town. They don't care if someone is dead. It's the circus that counts.

MARY LOU. You're sure doing your share to make it a three-ring affair.

BUELL. I'm doing what I do best of all. And dear sister, I'm being myself, not hiding behind a false face.

MARY LOU. Listen, Buell, tell me something. Did you know Daddy? Did you know him really? Did you know what he was like?

BUELL. Off balance. How. . . what do you mean "know him?"

MARY LOU. Know what he wanted, how he was when he was away from this house?

BUELL. I used to drive him around when he was drinking. . . .

MARY LOU. What did he talk about?

BUELL. Irritably. I don't know. Dammit, I don't remember. It was a long time ago. He talked about how he wanted to learn to fly an airplane. He was always going to take lessons. Said he was going to fly out to see me someday and surprise me. He used to write me that before he

quit writing me. Said he was going to swoop down from the sky and pay me a visit at camp. Oh, hell! Why are you asking me? I didn't know him.

MARY LOU. You were with him the most.

BUELL. To hell with all this talk. What's the good of it? What're you trying to prove, anyway?

MARY LOU. I don't know. I keep wanting to hear about him. I'm not trying to prove anything.

BUELL. Leave me out of it. I didn't know him. . . .

Alma calls softly from bedroom: "Mary Lou? Are you asleep?"

BUELL. Moving toward door. Don't tell her I'm home. Do you hear? Leave me alone. If you tell her, I'll knock the hell out of you, Mary Lou. He waves fist at her and exits front door.

ALMA. Enters. Have the boys come back? It's four in the morning. . . . Mary Lou!

MARY LOU. What, Mother?

ALMA. Honey, are you smoking?

MARY LOU. Everyone's out in the kitchen. No one's going to see.

ALMA. I don't want you to smoke while they're in this house.

MARY LOU. I haven't had a cigarette since they came. That's pretty good for what Zetta calls a "nicotine-fiend," isn't it?

ALMA. I wish you didn't smoke. You never smoked before you went off to school. Girls just aren't supposed to smoke. It looks mannish.

MARY LOU. Puts it out. Okay, it's out.

ALMA. That's my good girl. She sits in chair, looks vaguely about, bites her nails.

MARY LOU. Mother?

ALMA. Hmmm?

MARY LOU. What are you going to do now?

ALMA. What do you mean, "do now?"

MARY LOU. Well, daddy's dead.

ALMA. Just keep going on, I suppose.

MARY LOU. What about the bank?

ALMA. It's ours.

MARY LOU. Well, what are you going to do with it?

ALMA. I haven't thought much about it, haven't had time. I've been so upset. . . .

MARY LOU. Who's going to run it?

ALMA. Oh, Mary Lou, do we have to talk about it? I don't know. I guess Wendell can run it fine. He's worked there with Bond. You can work there, too.

MARY LOU. I don't want to work there. And Wendell doesn't know enough about the bank to run it. He's been trained to be a teller, pure and simple.

ALMA. We'll all just have to learn about it together.

MARY LOU. Mother, do you think the town's going to sit back and let the Rouses learn the banking business when it's their money deposited there?

ALMA. We're not going to steal their money, for heaven's sake. Everyone in town knows we're all honest. If Bond had ever told me about the bank business, this wouldn't be so hard. But he never talked about it.

MARY LOU. Did you ever ask?

ALMA. Of course I asked, and he said it was none of my business

how much money people had in their bank accounts.

MARY LOU. Oh, great God!

ALMA. Stop that cursing. I don't know what's gotten into you, Mary Lou, smoking and cursing and worrying me. You used to be a quiet child; in fact that worried me, too, the way you'd get in a corner and read and never say a word. But you've got to be a good girl now and help me all you can. You and Wendell are all I have left.

MARY LOU. What about Buell?

ALMA. Buell? Why, I've given up trying to do anything with him.

MARY LOU. What if he has ideas about the bank?

ALMA. Who, Buell? Looks frightened for a moment. Buell? Buell come back home to live? Brushes thought aside. Oh, he wouldn't want to fool with the bank. He's always hated it.

MARY LOU. But that was because he couldn't get along with Daddy.

ALMA. He's too restless. He always wanders off. You can't count on Buell like you can Wendell. But aren't they both fine looking boys? If you'd dress like I tell you to, you'd be the cutest girl in town.

MARY LOU. But I don't. Now what about the bank, Mother?

ALMA. I don't know, Mary Lou. Stop worrying me. It's always been in the family, and we'll work it out somehow. Wendell can run it, you'll see.

MARY LOU. But, Mother. . . .

ALMA. Now, hush. You're making me nervous. Where're those boys? I hope they're not drinking. If they acted up now, I'd just die. I don't know what's wrong with my kids. I guess I've just been too good to you and none of you appreciate it.

Preacher enters from arch. Sits in chair near Alma downstage right.

PREACHER. I hate to bother you, Mrs. Rouse, but I thought while everyone was out of the way we could talk about the funeral some more.

ALMA. Yes, I suppose we do have to plan it. I want it nice, but I'm so upset.

PREACHER. Of course.

Alma notices Mary Lou is sprawled out on couch.

ALMA. Mary Lou, sit up, for goodness sake.

MARY LOU. Sitting up. Sorry.

PREACHER. Being professional and enjoying his work. I wondered if there was any certain thing about your late husband you want emphasized in the sermon at the church?

ALMA. Just say how fair he was to everyone in all the dealings at the bank.

PREACHER. Yes, everyone knows what a good honest banker he was. Jots information down in a little notebook. I hesitate to ask this, but it's important. Was Mr. Rouse a Christian?

ALMA. A Christian? Why, I suppose so. Aren't we all?

MARY LOU. Not automatically, Mother. Some people even have to work at it.

PREACHER. What I mean is, did the late Mr. Rouse accept Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour? Maybe when he was a boy?

ALMA. Well, he never went to church as long as I knew him. His people were good Baptists, though, except of course his father. Brother Palmer, seems like the bank never left the Rouse men with much time for anything else.

PREACHER. It's a great responsibility, I know. And he was always

fair, a good banker, just like his father.

ALMA. He really was.

PREACHER. Now, Mrs. Rouse, did he have any favorite hymns we can sing at the service?

ALMA. He didn't sing much, except once and a while when he was shaving. The only thing I can remember right off hand is "Rosemarie." He whistled that. Did you ever hear him sing a hymn, Mary Lou?

MARY LOU. No. He did teach us kids "The Little Brown Jug" when we were little, a long time ago.

ALMA. That's not even close to being a hymn, and I nearly had a fit when I heard that he was teaching you that. It's not a good type song at all for children.

MARY LOU. Why does it have to be a hymn?

ALMA. They always sing hymns. They sang "Peace, Be Still, My Soul" at Sanford's funeral. That was nice.

MARY LOU. Couldn't we pick some good music?

PREACHER. It'll have to be from our song book we use at the church, Mary Lou. The choir hasn't worked up any special numbers. There just isn't time.

ALMA. I think it should be from the church song book. We all know those hymns. How about "The Old Rugged Cross?"

PREACHER. That isn't exactly a funeral piece, but it'd do I suppose. Why don't you let me ask the choir director to pick the appropriate hymns the singers know best, Mrs. Rouse? The service would go smoother and I think it'd be nicer.

ALMA. Well, since he didn't have any favorite hymns, I suppose it would be better. And it takes a lot off my shoulders. I have so many things to think about.

PREACHER. I'll see that everything goes off just right, Mrs. Rouse. You can trust me.

ALMA. I know I can, Brother Palmer.

Zetta enters from front door, trying to keep calm.

ZETTA. Alma, I wanted to talk to you about something.

PREACHER. We're all through with this, Mrs. Rouse. I'll leave you to rest. If you think of anything we can add, just let me know before the service. Exits arch.

ALMA. Thank you, Brother Palmer. Waits till he's gone. Zetta, what's the matter?

ZETTA. Those boys are home.

ALMA. How are they?

ZETTA. I don't know. They're sitting out in front of my house in my car. I went out and asked them to come in and Buell told me to go away.

ALMA. Buell's been drinking. Mary Lou, run over there and see if you can get them to go in Zetta's house. They mustn't come in here.

MARY LOU. Rising, crossing to door. Why don't you let them stay in the car?

ZETTA. To herself. I didn't know they were taking my car out.

ALMA. Mary Lou, go do what I say.

Mary Lou exits front door.

ZETTA. Alma, I'd have that Buell locked up in jail till the funeral's over if I were you.

ALMA. Zetta, you're crazy. He's got to go to his own father's funeral. We'll just keep them at your house and tell everyone they've gone to bed.

ZETTA. I don't know whether I want Buell over there or not. You remember the last time he was home he got drunk and broke every stick of furniture in his bedroom here.

ALMA. That was the night the poor kid had the dreams about the war. It's not many kids who went through two wars, Zetta. He's been through a lot, but I think he's all over it now. He seems quieter.

ZETTA. He's mean when he's drinking.

ALMA. I don't want to talk about it now. You don't have any kids, Zetta. It's easy for you to say these things.

ZETTA. Sharply. No, but I sure helped raise yours, Alma. And look at all Sanford did for them their own father didn't do. He gave them money and candy and. . . .

ALMA. I've got so much on my mind. I wish we could be quiet for a while.

ZETTA. All right. Sits on couch. Let's be quiet.

As they sit quietly. Alma alternately bites her nails and pulls at her hair. Zetta steadily picks at her dress. The lodge members' laughter drifts in low. After a few moments, Mama pokes her head through bedroom door. She is wearing nightgown.

MAMA. What's everything so quiet about?

ALMA. Mama, go back to bed.

MAMA. What time is it?

ZETTA. Almost morning.

MAMA. When I die I don't want anyone sitting up. Where're the women and the preacher?

ALMA. In the kitchen drinking coffee and talking.

MAMA. No point in this sitting up. Everyone has a good time but the family. Slams her door.

ZETTA. Maybe we'd better shut the dining room door. They could hear if the boys came in here.

ALMA. Zetta, can't you be still?

They're quiet again for a moment. Then Zetta jumps up and closes archway doors. She moves to window by front door and looks out.

ZETTA. Maybe I should go help Mary Lou.

ALMA. You'd just make Buell mad, Zetta. You don't know how to handle him.

ZETTA. I wish they hadn't used my car.

ALMA. If only he'd behave as good as he looks.

ZETTA. Bond was. . . .

ALMA. Cutting her off. Zetta, I want us to quit talking about Bond. For once in your life, shut up!

ZETTA. Hurt. Why, Alma! Talking to your own sister that way.

ALMA. You lost Sanford in peace, and no matter what Bond was when he was alive, he's only been dead two days and this just isn't the time to talk about him.

ZETTA. Huffed. But I lost something, Alma. Sanford was a good man, better to your kids than Bond was.

ALMA. I've been both mother and father to my kids and don't you ever doubt it, Zetta.

ZETTA. And look how they turned out !

ALMA. Rises, mad. If you'd ever had any, you'd know what it was like to raise them. But you're childless !

ZETTA. I've had enough raising someone else's.

Sister fight taking on loud whispered tones. Mama appears at left door.

MAMA. Girls, shut up.

ALMA. Mama, she has the gall to stand here and tell me I haven't raised my kids right, and after all I've done for them.

ZETTA. They've been over at my house as much as they've been here.

MAMA. I want you both to hush up.

ZETTA. But, Mama, Alma said. . . .

MAMA. The dead's still under this roof. You can fight after he's under the ground. Now, hush.

ZETTA. She'll have more peace when he's under the ground. Look at her, how nervous she is. Poor thing's almost out of her mind.

MAMA. Everyone sit down.

Zetta goes to chair near arch. Mama sits on couch. Alma sniffing into her handkerchief goes to sit by Mama.

MAMA. Now, Zetta, leave Alma alone.

ZETTA. I just try to help, you know that, Mama.

Mrs. Simmons enters through closed dining room doors.

MRS. SIMMONS. The ladies wondered if you would like some coffee and sandwiches from the kitchen?

ALMA. Thank you, Mrs. Simmons, but we're just trying to rest.

MRS. SIMMONS. It's a pity you can't sleep. I saw the door closed but I thought I'd see if you were hungry. I heard voices out here.

ALMA. Just don't feel like eating, thanks.

MRS. SIMMONS. You all should be in bed. We're here to sit up and watch, you know.

ZETTA. We appreciate it, too, Mrs. Simmons, all of us.

Mrs. Simmons modestly holds up her hand for no more praise and exits through the archway, softly closing the doors behind her.

ZETTA. Alma, why don't you go lie down?

ALMA. I can't sleep. Not till I know my boys are settled.
Mama, go put a wrap on. It's cool in here.

ZETTA. Going to window. No one's on the porch. I wonder where the lodge men went.

ALMA. Zetta, I don't know. I'm so worn out I can hardly sit here. I wish it were all over. The whole thing.

ZETTA. Here comes Mary Lou. One of the boys is with her, Alma.

ALMA. Why is she bringing him over here?

ZETTA. Looks like he's bringing her. Opens door for them.

Wendell staggers in pulling Mary Lou along behind him. He speaks boldly, self-assured when drinking.

WENDELL. Can you imagine a young girl like this running around in the streets by herself after dark?

MARY LOU. Wendell, you're hurting my arm. Let me go.
She wrenches loose, goes to stand behind a chair.

WENDELL. Whoops, there you go.

ALMA. Oh, Wendell, how can you do this to me? What happened?

WENDELL. Well, now, Mother, it started so innocently.

ZETTA. Come on, Wendell, we'll go to my house and get something to eat. Where's Buell, Mary Lou?

MARY LOU. In the car.

ALMA. Why did you let this poor child come over here, Mary Lou?

MARY LOU. I really didn't have much choice.

ALMA. I can't forgive Buell this. Wendell wouldn't drink if Buell didn't egg him on.

MAMA. Wendell's supposed to have a mind of his own, Alma. He can say "no."

WENDELL. Wrong again. Buell says I don't have a mind at all. Have to be told everything I do, that's what Buell says.

ZETTA. Well, I'm telling you to come home with me. Those ladies and the preacher are out in the kitchen and. . . .

WENDELL. You mean they're still here? Starts for arch. I'll have to go greet them.

MARY LOU. Dammit, Wendell, stay out of there.

WENDELL. Now my little sister's mad at me. Goes for her. Let's kiss and make up, Mary Lou? She dodges him. He turns toward Mama. Then I'll kiss that poor old gray head. He goes behind couch, puts his arms around Mama's neck.

ALMA. Wendell, stop that. Behave yourself.

MAMA. Wendell, honey, you're hurting me.

WENDELL. It's because I'm so strong.

Mary Lou goes to him, tries to pull him away.

MARY LOU. Leave her alone, Wendell.

Wendell swings at Mary Lou, misses, loses his balance, and falls flat on floor behind couch with his head toward the audience.

ALMA. Oh, great goodness!

WENDELL. Ohhhh, it's so cool down here.

ALMA. Get up, Wendell!

ZETTA. Oh, my, I hope they don't hear us out there. Oh my, oh my, get up, Wendell.

ALMA. Mary Lou, get hold of him and we'll pull him into Mama's room.

Mary Lou and Alma bend down behind couch to get hold of him when Maud enters with a cup of coffee. They straighten up. Wendell is hidden by couch.

MAUD. Alma, I brought you a good cup of coffee. How do you feel?

ALMA. Oh, just fine. We were trying to straighten the rug.

MAUD. I'll get the preacher to help. That's a man's job.

ALMA. Maud, please, we're done now. Put the coffee down.
We're going to try to get some sleep. You ladies just go ahead and drink your coffee and talk out there.

MAUD. Puts coffee down near arch. Yes, of course, Alma. Call if you need us. You've got a long, hard day ahead of you. Exits, tip-toeing. Closes doors after her.

ALMA. Almost crying. Oh, Mama, something's wrong with my kids, something's bad wrong. Why are they doing this to me at a time like this?

MARY LOU. Awkwardly putting arm around her. Now, Mother, he'll sleep it off. Wendell's real upset over Daddy dying. He just forgot the women were over here.

ZETTA. He never could hold his 'likker'. When he wakes up, he'll throw up all over the floor just like the last time Buell got him drunk.

MAMA. Stop all this fussing and get him in my room.

ALMA. Come on, Zetta, help us. He's heavy.

As Zetta crosses stage to help. Everett opens the front door and sticks his head in.

EVERETT. Softly. Listen, Alma, Buell's out there and he's pretty full.

ALMA. Where are the men from the lodge?

EVERETT. Some of them went home. Some of them are out in the backyard. Don't worry about them.

ALMA. Everett, can you help us with Wendell?

EVERETT. Enters, closes door behind him. Where do you want him put?

Alma points to bedroom. Everett half lifts and half drags Wendell.

ZETTA. Just like old times for you, isn't it, Everett? Only it's his son this time.

EVERETT. I don't appreciate that remark, Zetta. Not a bit.

MAMA. Go ahead, Everett, get him in there. Zetta, you keep quiet.

Everett exits with Wendell.

ALMA. Goes downstage left. I can't think of anything worse happening.

Mary Lou goes to window, looks across the street.

ZETTA. Is he still in the car?

MARY LOU. Can't tell. Isn't light enough yet.

EVERETT. Re-enters. He's out cold. I just put him across the bed. Better get back to Buell.

ALMA. Everett, we appreciate what you're doing.

EVERETT. Shrugs. I'd do about anything for his children. Exits front door.

MARY LOU. Lights cigarette. Don't worry, Mother, Everett can handle Buell.

ZETTA. Pointing at her. Look at your daughter, Alma, she's as bad as they are. Look at her puff on that cigarette.

ALMA. Wearily. Mary Lou, put it out.

MAMA. Rises, goes to bedroom. I'll see about this child. Exits.

ZETTA. Look at Mary Lou, Alma.

MARY LOU. I'm sick of being told what to do and what not to do.

ZETTA. This is a funeral. You can't carry on like that. Think of your mother!

MARY LOU. I do. That's all I think of when I'm home. Maybe this is why I like to be at school where there're other things to think about, happy things!

ALMA. Patiently. Just put the cigarette out, Mary Lou. Do what I say.

MARY LOU. Smashes cigarette in ashtray and holds it up. See, Zetta? Out, out, out! You win! It's out.

Zetta goes to her. Takes the ashtray and empties it in a wastebasket up-stage right. Mary Lou, disgusted, stomps across stage to piano bench and sits. Zetta primly wipes the ashtray clean and puts it down. She goes to the window and peeks out. Alma is sitting on couch looking strained and tired.

ALMA. Will this night never end?

ZETTA. I see some daybreak. I hope he gets out of that car before it gets light.

MARY LOU. Zetta, why don't you go to bed?

ZETTA. Because someone has to stand by Alma, that's why.

ALMA. I just wish it were all over.

ZETTA. It's going to be a long day. It was the longest day of my life when we buried Sanford.

ALMA. Leans back and closes her eyes. Let's all be quiet.

MARY LOU. Let's.

ZETTA. I hope it doesn't rain. It's so dismal at the graveyard when it rains. Do you remember how we all had to sit under a tent when we buried. . . .

MARY LOU. I thought we were going to be quiet!

A few seconds of quietness pass. Enter preacher from arch.

PREACHER. Mrs. Rouse, I believe I'll slip home to get some rest. Didn't mean to stay up so late, but I thought there should be a man in the house during the night.

ALMA. Yes. My boys weren't here, were they?

PREACHER. It's getting near daybreak. You won't mind if I leave now?

ALMA. Honestly. I wish you would go home, Brother Palmer.

PREACHER. Just remember you're in our prayers. It's hard for you now, but things will be brighter in time. It takes time for wounds from sorrow to heal, Mrs. Rouse.

ZETTA. To herself. Sometimes they never heal. You just go on and on and hurt and hurt.

PREACHER. Mrs. Rouse, you must try to keep busy. You know you're surrounded by friends who only wish you well, people you've known all your life. And you've got all your children.

ALMA. Sadly. Yes, I have the children.

PREACHER. So, I'll run along and. . . . Opens door. I'll be back in the morning. . . . Looks out. Oh, it is morning, isn't it? Then I'll be back later.

ALMA. Thanks for everything, Brother Palmer.

PREACHER. Just my duty. Good night. Laughs. I mean good morning. Starts out, covering a yawn. Stops half way out door. Well, Buell! I thought you boys. . . . Hello, Everett. I couldn't make out who you were for a minute there. You all out on the porch waiting for the morning to come? I was just starting home.

The preacher starts backing in the room. Buell has finger on the preacher's chest, pushing him back in room. Buell, drunk, still walks fairly steadily. Everett is following helplessly.

PREACHER. For goodness sake, Buell, What's all this about?

BUELL. Very politely. Forgive me, preacher, I need some spiritual advice. Isn't it lucky for me I ran into you, you being a preacher and all?

PREACHER. Embarrassed, laughs nervously. Why, yes. . . .

EVERETT. Buell, let's go outside. Your mother wants to rest.

BUELL. Ignores him. Preacher, you remind me of a chaplain I had once. He came to me and my buddies when we were on the line in Korea. Told us to get right with God before we went into battle because some of us weren't coming back, he said.

PREACHER. It's a sad truth the chaplain is obligated to point out.

BUELL. He was right! Some of us didn't come back. Only two. Me and this other guy. We came back. And you know what we heard happened to that very same chaplain? He was sitting in an air-conditioned bar in Japan sipping beer and keeled over dead from a heart attack. So he didn't

come back either. Did he?

PREACHER. I'm afraid I never knew any chaplains who drank beer.

BUELL. You and I probably don't move in the same circles.

PREACHER. We try to help everyone, all kinds, we ministers do.

BUELL. Do you think I'm "right with God"?

PREACHER. I don't know, Buell. I've got to get on home. You shouldn't be in this condition, bothering your mother.

BUELL. Answer me!

PREACHER. I don't know.

BUELL. In best sergeant tones. Why the hell don't you? You're a preacher!

PREACHER. I just can't say. . . can't. . . .

BUELL. Angrily. Answer me, damn it, am I right with God or not?

EVERETT. Moves in to grab him. Here now, Buell, watch it.

PREACHER. If you'll come see me after the funeral, we'll talk about it, Buell.

BUELL. I want to talk about it now.

ALMA. Oh, Buell, please, please.

BUELL. See, my mother's all upset. She's always trying to get me and Wendell to go see the preacher, go to church. My brother should be here. He's the one who really pleases my mother. Where is ole Wendell anyway?

ZETTA. He's in bed. We should all go to bed.

Everett has been edging around to get between Buell and preacher.

EVERETT. Buell, let's go back to the car. You can talk to the preacher out there. Maybe we can give him a ride home.

ZETTA. Buell can't go out again. Realizes she's made mistake.

ALMA. Yes he can. He can go with Everett if he wants to.

BUELL. For once, Auntie Zetta, I agree with you. My place is here beside my mother. Where's Wendell?

EVERETT. Easily. Wendell's all right. Why don't we go sit on the porch and get some air? He puts his hand on Buell's arm.

BUELL. Jerking away. Goddammit, leave me alone, don't touch me. Politely to preacher. Oh, excuse me, chaplain, I hope I didn't offend you.

PREACHER. Firmly. No. No offense. I've had about enough of this. I'm going home.

BUELL. Leaving? I thought you'd come to help me with my soul.

PREACHER. You need help, my boy. You need a lot of help.

BUELL. Then you get the hell out of here. You're no help.

PREACHER. To Alma. I'll be back before time for the service. Try to rest. It's too bad this happened, but no one blames you. It isn't your fault. Good night. Exits.

BUELL. See that, Zetta? Still think he's a good man of God? Won't even help a sinner come home.

EVERETT. Buell, you've still got some in your pint. Let's go finish it off.

ZETTA. He's had too much to drink now, Everett Shaw!

BUELL. Yeah, Everett, shame on you, trying to lead me astray.

ALMA. Zetta, do keep your mouth shut.

BUELL. Do you think I'm drunk, Zetta, Auntie Zetta? Imagine that!

ZETTA. Points to coffee near arch. Drink that coffee, Buell

Rouse, and get hold of yourself!

Buell sways over to coffee. Picks it up carefully.

BUELL. A toast! To my favorite ole aunt. He slops the coffee down his shirt front. Goddammit, see what you made me do. Furiously. You made me spill it down my shirt, goddammit! Crashes cup to floor down-stage right against wall.

ALMA. Zetta, keep your mouth closed.

ZETTA. I just can't stand it! Buell, you're a disgrace to your mother.

All are glaring at Zetta now.

BUELL. My mother? My mother? It's my father who's dead, or is it? Who's dead around here anyway? Is it Mama? She's the oldest. She's the only one fit to live. Where is she? There's a funeral for someone around here. I want to see Mama. I want to be sure.

Buell starts for bedroom door. Mary Lou blocks him.

MARY LOU. Leave her alone.

BUELL. Moves closer. Get out of my way. I can't stand your educated guts. He means it. She moves.

EVERETT. Hold on, Buell. She's asleep. Don't wake her up.

BUELL. Just so she isn't dead. Takes pint from pocket. Dead people don't count.

EVERETT. Don't do that, Buell, not in front of the ladies. Let's go outside.

He holds bottle carefully in both hands and gulps. sways. puts it back in pocket. and goes to sit on couch with Alma.

ALMA. Please, I can't stand this, Buell, go outside.

BUELL. I like it with a roof over my head. Someone's always telling me to go outside like I'm a dog or cat or something. You don't know what it's like sleeping in the mud with nothing but rain to cover you, do you, Mother?

ALMA. Looks at him softly. No, son, I never have slept in the rain.

BUELL. Sarcastically. Try it some time. Makes you appreciate home. I remember Mama use to let us kids sleep in her bed if we were good. Rises. Maybe she'll let me sleep there tonight. I'm tired. . . . He goes on toward bedroom. Everett signals everyone to let him go, then follows him in.

ALMA. What have I done to deserve this? What?

ZETTA. He ought to be horsewhipped.

MARY LOU. I see these things and I don't believe them. We're not like this, are we? Are we?

ZETTA. Won't those women ever go home?

ALMA. I can't tell them to go home. It'd be like throwing them out, after they came from the goodness of their hearts.

ZETTA. She's worked her fingers to the bone for you kids, and look how you disgrace her to her friends.

MARY LOU. I never honestly knew we were this way. We're not a family. We're some sordid individuals who can't even pull ourselves together enough to bury a man.

ALMA. Those are unkind words, Mary Lou. They're words against me.

Mary Lou doesn't answer. She cradles her head in arms on piano.

ZETTA. I never thought I'd see the day. . . .

ALMA. Zetta, hush. I've got to think about things. So much has happened. So much. My mind's in a whirl.

EVERETT. Re-enters. I think he's going to be all right. He's talking about going to sleep and he's undressing.

ZETTA. His father roared about the house till he dropped. He never went to bed on his bad nights.

EVERETT. His father had sorrows, Zetta, a lot of sorrow. And he had loneliness.

ZETTA. He had a family to come home to, and every night he came home drinking, always drinking.

ALMA. Everett, you've helped us, and we appreciate it.

ZETTA. Yes, Everett, you were a good friend to Bond. He'd rather been with you than his own family.

ALMA. Thank you, Everett, for helping. Maybe you'd better go now.

EVERETT. All right. Don't be too hard on the boy, Alma.

Buell appears at bedroom door. Holds on frame to steady himself. He has on his shorts, T-shirt, and socks. Has bottle in his left hand.

ZETTA. Don't be hard on him? After all he's done? Tell me now, Everett, drinking isn't the sin of the age. Look how Alma is suffering, has suffered. First Bond, now Buell. Drinking, always drinking. No reason, no excuse for it. That filthy, filthy stuff.

BUELL. Yells at her. "That filthy, filthy stuff!"

ZETTA. Goes to couch. Buell! Everett, don't let him come out here like that.

BUELL. Going to couch. I'm going to clean this place up, and you'll not get in my way, Zetta, you or anyone else.

Mary Lou goes to stand in front of him as he staggers toward center stage.

MARY LOU. Look, Buell, those women will hear you and come out here. Do you want them to see you like this?

BUELL. Yes! They're so worried about the precious bank and their money. Let them come out and see the next Rouse in line. . .let them see. Come on out. Calls. Come out, ladies.

MARY LOU. Angrily. Daddy's in there!

BUELL. Come out and see!

MARY LOU. Bull! Bull! Buell-bull. . . bull!

BUELL. Moves toward her. Oh, my little sister, my bright stupid little sister. . . .

MARY LOU. Explodes. You son of a bitch, you ignorant, dumb. . . .

Buell slaps her hard in the face. Everett gets hold of the back of his shorts as the Golden Missionary Society is filing into the room, exclaiming "What's wrong? Who's shouting? My word! Heavens! etc." Zetta is behind couch where Alma still sits. Mary Lou has backed upstage leaving Everett and Buell center stage facing arch. Mama has come to bedroom door where she stands.

MAUD. First in room. Oh, great day!

MRS. SIMMONS. Breaking for door. Oh, he doesn't have any clothes on, and he's fighting. . . help! Exits.

MAUD. As she follows Mrs. Simmons. Do something, Everett. He's drunk!

Buell has fixed his glare on Elzora who's glaring back. Lottie stands in arch.

ALMA. Going between Buell and Elzora. Please, oh God, please, Buell stop it. Elzora, leave, please.

BUELL. What's she staring at, the old bat?

ELZORA. You're drunk and your father lies there in his coffin.

BUELL. It was his bank. It was his daddy's before him. . .
I'm the eldest son. . . .

ELZORA. My money'll not stay there.

BUELL. You go home. The wake's over. We're going to bury the dead. Go on home and dig a hole in your basement and put your money in it.

ELZORA. Look at you. Look at yourself. I saw you grow up, and I see you now, acting like a crazy thing, like an animal.

ALMA. He's my son, Elzora Potter, you'll not talk to him like that. No matter what, he's my son.

ELZORA. I'd be ashamed to admit it, Alma. I feel sorry for you.

ALMA. In tears. No one has to feel sorry for me. They're mine. They're my kids. Don't you forget it, not for a minute.

ELZORA. Edges for door. I feel sorry, really sorry for you.

LOTTIE. Pushing her out door. Well, get on out the door, Elzora. Leave these people alone. We don't have any business seeing this. Get out the door, and leave them alone. They exit.

BUELL. Shouting after them. Don't come back. Don't ever come back. Do you hear?

Alma walks sobbing across to couch. Zetta stands frozen, staring at Buell. Everett has stepped back and is looking at him. Mary Lou is braced against the wall with her hand to her face, watching him.

BUELL. Now maybe we can breathe. Let's all have a drink. Waves bottle at Mary Lou. Mary Lou, come have a drink. They'll find out about you sooner or later, why not now? Everett? No one take a drink with me? He throws back head and swallows. As he brings bottle down he sees them

all silently staring at him. What's the matter? What's the matter with everyone? Don't you want a drink? Laughs. No one? I know who'll take a drink with me. The old man would like one last drink. I'll go ask him. He never refused a drink.

Buell starts for arch as Everett grabs him.

EVERETT. Stop it, Buell, he's dead.

BUELL. That's all right. Some of the finest people I know are dead. Lots of them dead, only they didn't have arms or legs or heads, some of them. Lots are dead. . . Goddammit, Everett, let go. I said let go! With his one free arm he struggles with Everett.

ALMA. Everett, do something. . . .

EVERETT. Outside, let's take the bottle outside. . . .

Buell gives him a shove that sends Everett across the room. Buell staggers through archway muttering. "The old man gets his drink. . . ." By the time Everett is on his feet, Buell has screamed. Everyone is motionless, looking toward arch, waiting. Buell appears in archway, leaning against it, sobbing.

BUELL. Oh, my God, he wouldn't open his mouth. I spilt it all over him, but, Mother, he wouldn't open his mouth. Starts sliding to floor. Daddy's dead. My daddy's dead. . . .

He keeps muttering this as he rests on floor. Mama has moved across the room and kneels by him, rocking him in her arms.

MAMA. There, there, little boy, it's all right, don't cry. Sings low. There, there, "The bear went over the mountain, the bear went over the mountain to see what he could see"

ALMA. You can go on home, Everett. We'll get him to bed.

EVERETT. Going to door, very tired. He was awful shook up by Bond's death, Alma. No one knows how much.

ALMA. No. No one knows.

EVERETT. I'll come around before the funeral. Opens door.

ZETTA. Awed. Look at him. Just look.

MARY LOU. Crosses to outside door. I'm going across the street to sleep, Mother. Exits behind Everett.

ALMA. Yes, we need sleep. She turns to look at Mama and Buell.
Come on Zetta, let's put him on the couch here. Everyone's gone now, help me.

They go to Buell and Mama. The three women bend over him.

CURTAIN

ACT III

At curtain Mary Lou is sitting in arm chair to right of arch looking at Buell who is sprawled asleep on the couch covered by a quilt. Wendell is making his way across stage holding up his pajama pants with one hand. He waves vaguely at Mary Lou and exits archway. Mary Lou puts out her cigarette and goes over to Buell. She pokes him in the ribs and he rolls over with a groan.

MARY LOU. Get up.

BUELL. Dammit, leave me alone.

MARY LOU. Keeps jabbing him until he sits up. mad. Get up, get up!

BUELL. If you don't get out of here and let me sleep. . . . He stops. Realizes he's on couch. Rubs head. Wow! What a night!

MARY LOU. Wow! Wasn't it? Returns to arm chair.

BUELL. Give me a cigarette.

She throws pack and matches. He misses, picks them up, lights one, and throws match on the floor.

BUELL. What the hell are you staring at?

MARY LOU. You

BUELL. Squints at her. My God, what a shiner! Where'd you get that?

MARY LOU. From you.

BUELL. Grins and groans. It's a dandy. I must've raised hell last night. . . .of all nights. . .Wow!

MARY LOU. Mother wants to talk to you about it.

BUELL. I can hear Zetta now! Mimics her. "Your poor Mother, what've you done to your poor Mother?" Whoosh, my head hurts.

MARY LOU. Good.

BUELL. Aw, shut up. Lies back down.

MARY LOU. Don't go back to sleep. You've got to sober up for the funeral, Buell.

BUELL. What time is it?

MARY LOU. Time to get dressed.

Wendell enters.

BUELL. Well, how do you feel?

WENDELL. About like you look. Whooooee!

Buell laughs. Mary Lou smiles at Wendell holding his head.

BUELL. Mimicking Zetta. "Such a nice boy, and had to go drink that whisky!"

WENDELL. Awww. Sees Mary Lou's eye. How'd that happen?

MARY LOU. Ask Buell.

WENDELL. Going to her, touching it. Wow, that's something. Does it hurt?

MARY LOU. Knocks his hand away. Yes, it hurts. Leave it alone.

WENDELL. Isn't there some ice or beef or something to put on it?

MARY LOU. Don't bother. I like it this way. A little memento to take back to school. . .a souvenir from the day we buried our father.

WENDELL. Did you do that?

BUELL. She said I did.

WENDELL. What happened?

BUELL. I don't know. She said I hit her.

WENDELL. What'd she do to you?

BUELL. I don't know, stupid, but it must've been something or I wouldn't have hit her. Turns over. Why don't we all go back to sleep?

Throws cigarette at Mary Lou's feet. Put that out.

MARY LOU. Picking up cigarette and putting it out. Buell, you're not in a barracks. You're in a living room.

BUELL. It's all one and the same to me. Pulls quilt over him.

MARY LOU. Get off that couch. Mother's coming over here to talk, and there's not much time before the funeral.

BUELL. Rises on elbow. Jabs thumb at her. Well, get her! You in command now?

MARY LOU. Come on, Buell, get up. We've all got to dress and eat.

WENDELL. Looks at watch. There sure isn't much time, Buell. We gotta get dressed before the people start stopping by.

MARY LOU. I have a feeling the people won't be stopping by before the funeral, nor afterwards.

WENDELL. Did the ladies know we were. . . did they see us last night?

MARY LOU. They sure did.

BUELL. They shouldn't have been here in the first place. Damn them anyway.

WENDELL. Is there any aspirin around? I'm going to need something before we face Mother.

BUELL. Standing. What you need for that hangover is a stiff shot.

WENDELL. Not for me.

BUELL. Pads in his sockfeet to desk near arch. Finds his pint bottle in drawer. Well, for me then. Always pays to find out where they hide your left-overs. And Zetta hides it in the same place every time. Buell takes a drink from the bottle, shivers, puts bottle back.

BUELL. Where's Mother?

MARY LOU. Over at Zetta's. They'll be here in a minute.

BUELL. Taking bottle out. If Zetta's coming with her for this little family conference, I'd better have another one. He takes another drink, longer this time, shivers, shakes his head, puts bottle back. Sure you won't have a nip, Mary Lou? Too early for an eye opener? No pun intended.

MARY LOU. Oh, shut up. You've already fixed me up by offering me a drink.

BUELL. Did I talk too much last night?

MARY LOU. You talked too much, much too much.

BUELL. Well, you drink. Why hide it?

MARY LOU. But it's not the way you drink. Mother doesn't know anything about drinking except what she's seen around you and Daddy. I don't drink like that.

BUELL. Winking at Wendell. She's a social drinker, Wendell. Big deal. She and her little collegiate friends have cocktails. Nothing low down like us peons. Big deal.

MARY LOU. She thinks if you even taste it you automatically are a drunkard because that's all she's ever seen around here. She doesn't know about decent drinking.

BUELL. There is no decent drinking. Except for Saint Mary Lou who makes up her own rules.

WENDELL. Oh, leave her alone, Buell, for pete's sake. You two have fought since we were little. Seems like you'd get tired of it. Why do you have to ride her all the time?

BUELL. Keeps her on the ground, out of those clouds. She's always been a little nutty, but that college is making a dreamer out of her.

MARY LOU. That college is the only real thing I've found. I know I'm alive when I'm there.

BUELL. Baiting her. What does this school have, Mary Lou, that it makes you "alive"?

MARY LOU. It has real human beings, people who think and know what's important.

BUELL. Watch me closely. I'm thinking. He shuts eyes and wrinkles forehead.

WENDELL. Laughing. Aw, cut it out.

BUELL. Why don't you accompany me on the piano while I think, Mary Lou?

Mary Lou, mad, lights cigarette and ignores him.

BUELL. Mary Lou, hey, Mary Lou, why don't you play us a real high class number on the piano? Hey, Mary Lou, hey, brain, thinker?

WENDELL. Aw, leave her alone, Buell. Quit teasing her.

BUELL. The big brother to the rescue, huh, Wendell? Mimics.
"Aw, leave her alone, Buell!" Good boy. You make me sick.

MARY LOU. Flaring up. And you make me sick.'

WENDELL. Good, we all make each other sick, so let's drop it.

MARY LOU. Do you remember anything about last night, Buell?

BUELL. Sure. Do you think I black out or something? You came bitching out to the car and got Wendell. Then Everett came out and had a drink with me. I came in and went to bed here on the couch because Wendell was all sprawled out over Mama's bed.

MARY LOU. Mother will have a few details to add to that story.

BUELL. Those are the highlights.

WENDELL. That's more than I remember.

MARY LOU. You were asleep.

BUELL. You lucky dog, you. Goes to desk and takes out bottle for drink.

MARY LOU. Are you going to the funeral drunk, too?

WENDELL. Boy, I don't see how you can do it. You must have insides of steel.

BUELL. They call it iron guts in the Army, Wendell. Looks inside the arch. I guess he slept well last night.

MARY LOU. Watching Buell closely. Yes, I guess he did.

BUELL. Smells like a distillery, but that's nothing new.

WENDELL. Get off it, Buell.

BUELL. "Get off it, Buell." Haven't you ever been around dead people before? Oh, that's right, excuse me. You were one of those Army state-side flowers who never left your clerk-typist desk job.

WENDELL. Indignantly. Look, don't start in on that stuff again. We all know you got wounded and have a hole in your back to prove it.

BUELL. You betcha your damn boots I have. And one thing that doesn't impress me any more is dead people. Anyway, we didn't bother with him when he was alive so what's all this crap about him being dead?

MARY LOU. When are you going to grow up and get off that funny pedestal of being the only honest person in the world?

BUELL. When you stop being the biggest hypocrite!

MARY LOU. At least there is some reason for what I do.

BUELL. How'd you like another eye to match that beauty?

MARY LOU. Okay, Sgt. Rouse. That's all you know how to do. If anyone crosses you, just knock the hell out of them.

BUELL. So stay out of my way.

WENDELL. I think my head's going to pop! Mary Lou, would you get me a cup of coffee if there's any out there? Honest, I'd appreciate it.

MARY LOU. The change of atmosphere would be a pleasure. Exits.

WENDELL. Thanks. Hey, Buell, you got a cigarette?

BUELL. We your servants or something?

WENDELL. Oh, just give me a cigarette, will you?

BUELL. Sorry, I was smoking the Queen's and she took them with her, being generous and big-hearted like she is.

WENDELL. I'll get them. Exits as Mama enters from bedroom.

Buell rubs his head and paces for a moment. He goes to sit on the couch.

MAMA. Where's he going?

BUELL. Everyone's gone for a change of atmosphere.

MAMA. Touching his hair. You feel bad?

BUELL. I feel terrible, Mama.

MAMA. What can I do for you?

BUELL. A new head would help.

MAMA. Is that all?

BUELL. Naw, new everything. That's what I need.

MAMA. How old are you, Buell?

BUELL. Twenty-eight.

MAMA. I was the first person besides Alma and the doctor to see you.

BUELL. I must've been an ugly baby.

MAMA. You were not! You were the prettiest of all the babies. You had this black hair and you didn't cry. I think you were smiling at the beginning.

BUELL. Now, Mama, all new babies cry.

MAMA. You didn't.

BUELL. There must have been something wrong with me.

MAMA. No, you were just a happy child. You always laughed a lot. I remember you best in your little yellow sunsuit puttering in the flowers. A bee stung you once. And do you know what you said?

BUELL. Grinning. I probably said, "Goddamn you bee!"

MAMA. Buell! You did not. You said, "Bee, don't sting my flowers!" You loved flowers.

Buell laughs.

MAMA. That is the first time I've heard you laugh since you've been home.

BUELL. I don't know why it's funny. I've heard you tell that story a million times.

MAMA. You were always good with the little gardens you planted.

BUELL. I liked them. Things really grew for me, didn't they?

MAMA. Yes, they did. Lottie's going to give me some Mimosa seedlings. Will you plant them on the northside for me?

BUELL. Yeah, if I get time.

MAMA. You'll have time. Goes to rocker downstage left.

BUELL. Mama?

MAMA. What? Pulls puzzle out of pocket.

BUELL. Mama, what the hell happened here last night?

MAMA. You don't remember?

BUELL. Some I do. But Mary Lou keeps acting like I did something terrible.

MAMA. Your mother'll have to talk to you about it. I'm staying out of it.

BUELL. But, Mama, dammit. . . .

MAMA. I'm staying out of it. It's for your mother to talk about.

Wendell enters. Throws cigarette to Buell. Mama bends over puzzle and detaches herself.

WENDELL. There you are. I found a new pack.

BUELL. Gee whiz! Some of my very own.

WENDELL. You're going to have to get off that horse, Buell, if you stay around here. Sits right.

BUELL. What horse, for God's sake?

WENDELL. You know what I mean. You act like everyone's against you.

BUELL. You don't know what you're talking about. I don't think everyone's against me. I just happen to know they don't give a damn, period.

WENDELL. That's what I mean, that kind of attitude.

Mary Lou enters. Hands Wendell coffee.

BUELL. Thanks for bringing me some.

MARY LOU. Sits. It didn't occur to me that you drank coffee, too.

BUELL. Why don't you go find another atmosphere?

MARY LOU. You don't know how I'd like to. Away from you, this town, everything.

BUELL. No one's holding you.

MARY LOU. Mama, why do we fight like this? Why does he have to be so unbearable?

Mama ignores question and keeps working puzzle.

BUELL. Get out, go on. We don't need you around here.

MARY LOU. "We" did you say? Since when did you come back in the family circle?

BUELL. As of now, the day we bury the elder Rouse.

MARY LOU. Do you mean it? Wendell, what does he mean?

Mama has looked up, now watching them.

BUELL. Does it shock you that the son might decide to come back from the wars?

MARY LOU. You've come home before, and I've seen how it worked. This is great. The whole town will be thrilled. The ugly Rouse boy comes home. The king is dead. Long live the king!

BUELL. Mad, advances on her. You keep your slut mouth shut or I'll shut it for you.

WENDELL. Half rising. Now, Buell, don't get worked up. Mama's here.

BUELL. Turning his back. She isn't worth getting worked up over.

MARY LOU. If you come back to stay, Mother will have to come to the college if she wants to see me. I'll not come home.

BUELL. We'll miss you, all of us. Heaps.

MARY LOU. I wouldn't stay under the same roof with you. Not after last night, I wouldn't.

BUELL. I don't care whether you come or go.

MARY LOU. Just what does the sergeant think he'll do here? Cautiously.
Manage the bank?

BUELL. Shouts at her. Who said anything about the bank?

WENDELL. He is going to try farming, Mary Lou.

MARY LOU. Laughs. Farm? Him a farmer?

BUELL. Wendell, why can't you keep your mouth shut?

MARY LOU. Still laughing. This is the best I've heard. You, a farmer. There'll be a drought or a plague of grasshoppers. You'll bring something down on the land.

MAMA. Sternly. He likes the earth, Mary Lou.

MARY LOU. Laughing. But, Mama, he doesn't know a plough from a spoon.

MAMA. You're not being very kind, Mary Lou.

WENDELL. He can take the government agriculture course they have out at the high school two nights a week.

BUELL. Elabber mouth, why do you have to tell everything?

MARY LOU. So, Sgt. Rouse is going to go to school.

BUELL. It's none of your business what I'm going to do.

MARY LOU. I don't care what you do. But if Mother thinks I'm quitting school she's mistaken. This cinches it.

WENDELL. You not coming home to stay with her?

MARY LOU. No, I'm not.

WENDELL. Gee, everyone knows what they're going to do.

MARY LOU. Haven't you figured out a way to work Wendell into your little farming scheme?

WENDELL. He'll let me farm with him if I want to. . .if we sell the bank.

MARY LOU. So you've got the bank problem worked out, too. We'll

just sell it?

BUELL. Got any better ideas?

MARY LOU. Frankly, no, but I think Mother has a say-so in the matter, and Wendell, too.

WENDELL. I don't know. . . .

MARY LOU. Why don't you get a job away from this town, Wendell?

WENDELL. Shrugs. Bank examiners coming through have told me about good jobs. But Mother sorta expects me to stay. And since Buell's going to be here, it'll be different.

MARY LOU. That's what I'm afraid of. I think you ought to get out as fast as you can.

BUELL. Hell no! Stay right here with me, Wendell. The farming Rouses! Think of that. We'll roar around on tractors during the day and have plenty of night life after the sun goes down.

MARY LOU. I don't get you. You say you hate this town and living at home.

BUELL. But I'm top man around here now. I'm going to stay here and live cheap, farm, and save my money. When I get a pile, maybe I'll buy a string of bars out on the coast.

MARY LOU. How screwed up can you get?

BUELL. Ask yourself. You've done right well at it.

MARY LOU. Maybe you're right. Gives up. And they say we don't get along because we're alike.

BUELL. Only I'm smart.

MARY LOU. And I'm dumb! That's why I'm going to school.

BUELL. Aw shut up. He begins pacing.

MARY LOU. How do you get out of the Army?

BUELL. I can get a discharge to come home to Mother since Daddy's dead.

MARY LOU. Where are you going to buy a farm?

BUELL. Who's going to buy a farm? Mother's sixty acres will be enough to get started on.

MARY LOU. It's half Zetta's. What's she going to say?

BUELL. She'd better say yes. I know I can farm it as well as that stupid sharecropper they've got on it now.

MARY LOU. At least he sends them their share.

BUELL. Glaring. You implying I'd hold back on their share?

MARY LOU. Giggling. ". . . Meanwhile, back at the farm house, the eldest son fingered the money he had hiddened in the tomato can. . . and then he opened another fifth. . . ."

BUELL. Stomping up to her. I'm not dishonest, dammit, they'll get their share!

MARY LOU. Still laughing. ". . . Then he unlocked his faithful brother from the closet and sent him out to milk the cow."

BUELL. Raging. Someday, I'll fix you so. . . .

WENDELL. Getting in between them. Everybody sit down. Mary Lou, stop it. Come on Buell, ignore her.

Buell begins pacing again. Wendell has sat down. Mary Lou's laughter turns into a minor case of hysterics.

MARY LOU. I'm sorry, Mama. I can't seem to stop laughing. It's all funny now, the way it's working out.

MAMA. Get hold of yourself, Mary Lou.

MARY LOU. I don't know whether I can or not. Aren't we funny,
Mama? Aren't we weird?

Mama doesn't answer. She turns back to puzzle.

BUELL. I think you sound like you're off your rocker.

WENDELL. You're all upset, Mary Lou. You don't have to worry about
Buell. He's a changed guy, really settled down.

MARY LOU. Pointing at Buell, she begins laughing again. Buell?

BUELL. Stop it. I'm telling you to stop it.

Front door opens. Zetta enters.

ZETTA. Buell, did you know you smashed the fender on my car last
night?

Mary Lou whoops with laughter again. Buell turns to advance on her.

ZETTA. Well, answer me, Buell. And, Mary Lou, stop that idiotic
laughter. This house is in mourning.

She laughs at this and begins getting hold of herself by degrees through
following conversation.

ZETTA. I'm sick. You bent the fender on my car. How'd you do
it, Buell? Tell me!

WENDELL. Shamefully. He didn't do it, Zetta. I did.

ZETTA. You did it, Wendell? Softening. Well, how did it
happen, honey?

WENDELL. Like a child. Well, you know that little narrow lane at
the farm, I was turning and bumped a tree.

ZETTA. Turning on Buell. Why did you let him drive, Buell? You
know he can't hold his "likker." Oh, the terrible things you've caused!

MARY LOU. Where's mother?

ZETTA. She's coming over here, Mary Lou. Will you put the car in the garage for me? Thank goodness we don't have to use it for the funeral.

MARY LOU. Rises. Takes keys from Zetta. Sure. I'll be glad to hide it.

BUELL. Leave it out. Accidents do happen. Even good Baptists have wrecks, don't they?

Mary Lou exits. Zetta goes to left. Sits on couch staring at Buell.

BUELL. Okay, okay, I'm going to get some clothes on. You make me feel naked, Zetta. Exits bedroom.

Zetta watches him go, shakes head, and starts to cry in handkerchief.

WENDELL. I'm sorry about the car, Zetta, real sorry. I'll pay to have it fixed, too.

ZETTA. It's not that. It's him.

WENDELL. I'm sorry about last night. . .the drinking and all. Is that what's the matter?

ZETTA. Hurries out through arch. Nothing's the matter. . .just everything !

Wendell strikes fist in his palm and with as much emotion as he can muster says:

WENDELL. Oh, damn! Seeing Mama look up surprised. Sorry, Mama.

There is bump-bump noise at front door. Wendell gets up, goes to admit Alma who has arms full of clothes and shoes.

ALMA. Here, take your clothes. Give Buell his. You've got to get dressed for the funeral.

WENDELL. Mother. . . .

ALMA. I thought I could depend on you at least, Wendell.

WENDELL. I'm sorry. . . .

ALMA. Well, go on. Take those clothes in and you all get dressed. Where's Buell?

WENDELL. In the bedroom.

ALMA. Hurry up and come out here, Buell. I want to talk to you.

Wendell meekly goes to bedroom door and exits. Zetta re-enters.

ZETTA. Alma, someone's got to change Bond's shirt and clean around his neck before they take him to the church. And it smells bad in there, too.

ALMA. Well, open the window. Buell will just have to clean up the mess he made. Calls. Buell, you hurry up.

ZETTA. Shameful. It's shameful. I don't know how I can face people.

ALMA. You'll have to face them the same as I will. Goes to bedroom door. Starts to open it. You boys hurry.

BUELL. From inside. Stay out of here. I'm dressing.

ALMA. Well, hurry now. Comes back center. Zetta, I don't know what to say to them.

ZETTA. I kinda feel sorry for Wendell. He feels bad about last night.

ALMA. He should. The idea of his behaving that way when he knows better.

ZETTA. If Buell hadn't been here, it wouldn't have happened. I can guarantee that!

ALMA. Oh, and Mary Lou's eye!

ZETTA. How can she walk into church with a black eye. At her

own father's funeral, too?

ALMA. She'll just have to try to cover it up with powder, because she's going to the church.

ZETTA. Look at Mama.

ALMA. Looks. Mama ignores them. I know. She's got that dirty dress on. Doesn't matter. She's not going to the church, and I don't imagine any of the ladies will be around here today.

WENDELL. Enters hurriedly buttoning his shirt. He's coming.

ALMA. Sit down.

WENDELL. I don't know what to say, Mother, except I'm real sorry. We were all wound up. I know it doesn't help things now, but we didn't mean to drink a lot.

BUELL. Enters fussing. Why in hell can't I keep all the buttons on my shirt?

ZETTA. Mad. Your poor mother washed and ironed that shirt herself!

BUELL. I'd just as soon you sent them to a laundry.

ZETTA. Go clean up your daddy!

BUELL. What do you mean, "Go clean up your daddy?" Haven't we paid the undertaker to keep him fixed up?

ALMA. Starts crying. Oh, Buell, Buell! Don't you know what you've done?

All are looking at him. He tries to be brusque.

BUELL. I don't know what you're talking about. What're you staring at me for?

ALMA. You tried to pour whisky in your daddy's mouth last night.

He's startled, still trying not to show it. Walks slowly to arch. Pauses.

WENDELL. He did what?

ZETTA. He poured "likker" all over Bond and told the Golden Circle ladies to go home and cursed the preacher and knocked Everett down.

WENDELL. Unbelieving. He did? Buell disappears in arch. Last night? He did all. . . Awed. That crazy fool. To do stuff like that he must be crazy.

BUELL. Re-enters. Okay, Wendell, get one of his shirts and a tie. We'll have to change him.

Wendell exits arch. Buell finds a cigarette and starts pacing downstage. He's shaken and doesn't look at any one.

ALMA. I knew you would do something like that if you went off last night.

ZETTA. Your poor mother, Buell. She hasn't slept a wink. If it were just in the family it wouldn't be so bad, but the whole town knows about it by now.

ALMA. Yes, everyone.

ZETTA. And why didn't you tell me about the car? You didn't even ask me if you could use it.

ALMA. Buell, don't you hear?

ZETTA. And you blacked Mary Lou's eye when she tried to keep you from acting so awful. At least Wendell got to bed with no one seeing him but Everett.

ALMA. Buell, don't you hear?

MAMA. Leave him alone. What's done is done.

WENDELL. Entering. Is this all right, Mother? Shows her tie and shirt.

ALMA. I don't like that tie.

ZETTA. It's one he got at a lodge convention. It's too loud.

ALMA. But it'll have to do. We haven't much time. Go ahead and use it. And hurry. We've got things to settle.

ZETTA. Buell, your mother said for you to hurry.

Buell turns abruptly on his heel and goes silently through arch. Wendell follows.

ALMA. I kinda feel sorry for the poor kid.

ZETTA. He should be ashamed. Such an awful thing.

ALMA. Let's not say any more about it until after the funeral. It upsets me every time I think of it.

ZETTA. They ought to eat something. They didn't have a bite of supper last night, and no breakfast.

MAMA. Did anyone fix breakfast?

ALMA. I can't do everything, Mama. I've only got two hands.

MARY LOU. Enters from outside. I got it put away. When are you going to get it fixed?

ZETTA. Oh, maybe at the end of the week you and I will take it out of town to a shop.

ALMA. Won't that be too soon after the funeral to be doing things?

ZETTA. I didn't hang out my wash for a month after Sanford died, but this is different. Besides we'll be taking it out of town.

MARY LOU. Don't count on me driving it anywhere, Zetta. I won't be here.

ALMA. Just where do you think you will be but here?

MARY LOU. School.

ALMA. Shocked. You're not planning to go back to school?

MARY LOU. Yes, I am.

ALMA. But, Mary Lou, your daddy's dead now.

ZETTA. To herself. As if he paid her way.

MARY LOU. Mother, I don't know how to say this, but I don't want to be home anymore. I want to go on studying. I know you think I should be here with you, but I just can't.

ZETTA. I guess you do want to go back to that college where you can study smoking and cursing and drinking, too, if what Buell said last night was right.

ALMA. You don't drink, Mary Lou, say you don't.

MARY LOU. Not the way you know it to be, Mother.

ZETTA. There's only one kind. Either you do or don't.

ALMA. Don't go back to that school. It's changing you, Mary Lou. Come stay home with your mother. I need you.

MARY LOU. I can't. Being firm. I'll stay a few days after the funeral, then I'm going back to school.

ALMA. I need help with the bank business.

MARY LOU. You're getting a lawyer. Whatever you do with it is fine with me. I'd sell it if I were you.

ALMA. But a Rouse has always run the bank.

MARY LOU. I'd sell it because it's going to do nothing but cause you trouble. There's no one left to run it.

ALMA. Wendell. . . .

MARY LOU. . . . Can't do it alone. Ask him. He realizes he can't take it over.

ALMA. Buell was the eldest. He was supposed to have it some day.

ZETTA. But he wouldn't stay home. He didn't learn.

MARY LOU. Looks like we've run out of bankers, Mother.

ALMA. Sharply. You don't know what you're talking about.

MARY LOU. Patiently. Look, now. Daddy never taught Wendell anything about running the bank. He put him in a teller's cage and left him.

ALMA. He intended to teach Wendell. He said Wendell was slower than Buell would've been. But I know he meant to teach Wendell all about it.

MARY LOU. He didn't, though.

ALMA. Bond died too soon!

ZETTA. Alma, don't fret. You're getting nervous.

ALMA. Crying. The family's always had bankers.

MARY LOU. Gently. Just Grandpa and Daddy, Mother.

ZETTA. Alma, what I think you'd better do is. . . .

ALMA. Cutting her off. Zetta, this is a family matter that I want you to stay out of. You're no help at all! Do you hear me?

ZETTA. You've never talked to me like that, Alma.

MAMA. From sidelines. She's right, Zetta. Shut up.

Zetta begins sniffing in hankie.

ALMA. We can work this out, Mary Lou. I feel we can. We'll all live together here, in this house like always. Maybe Zetta would close up her place and come live here, too.

ZETTA. I'd die before I'd move into this house where he lived.

ALMA. All right, Zetta, that's your choice. But things are

going to be different now. I can see it coming.

Wendell enters first, then Buell. Wendell sits downstage right. Buell slouches against arch.

WENDELL. We changed and washed him. Looks fine, Mother. Some of the powder-stuff was streaked so we took it all off.

ALMA. I thought it made him look chalky anyway. Now sit down, Buell, we're going to talk.

WENDELL. Come on, Buell, sit down.

Buell just looks at him and continues standing.

ALMA. I don't want to go to the funeral not knowing how we stand, what's going to happen.

WENDELL. You mean the bank?

ALMA. What're we going to do? How do you feel, Wendell?

WENDELL. I don't know. I wonder. . . I don't know.

MARY LOU. Say what you think.

WENDELL. I. . . I. . . well, in there wiping off Daddy's face, I looked at him good. He's dead, and I know for certain I can't take his bank over. I just can't. I don't know enough. And he never really tried to teach me, Mother.

ZETTA. He should have. You were the only one interested enough to work there.

WENDELL. Zetta, he didn't and that's all there is to it.

ALMA. But you can try, Wendell.

MARY LOU. And he could get a good job somewhere else, a job without a shadow hanging over it. Something he really likes to do.

ALMA. Didn't you like the bank, Wendell?

WENDELL. Why, I guess so, Mother. It wasn't hard work.

ALMA. You didn't really like it, son?

WENDELL Hangs head. Not enough to go on forever in it.

ZETTA. What in the world would you like to do?

WENDELL. I don't know.

MARY LOU. But you could find out, Wendell. Go somewhere to see things, new jobs. . . .

ALMA. Wendell? Leave home?

WENDELL. Fretting. What's there here for me now? What?

ZETTA. You could stay on at the bank and work as a teller.

ALMA. No! If he doesn't run it, then we'll sell it. That's what we'll do. I'll not see someone else over him, not for a day that it belongs to us.

MARY LOU. Best thing that could happen would be his leaving, getting out on his own.

ALMA. Like you? Because you're not staying you want him to leave, too?

MARY LOU. No, Mother, I don't mean it like that.

ALMA. I want my kids at home, with me.

MARY LOU. But there's something else besides home, besides this town.

ALMA. You're all I have. I thought now we could all be together and enjoy it. You and Wendell.

MARY LOU. Forcefully. I'm not staying, Mother. If you try to take me out of school by cutting off the money before I finish, I'll still not come home. I'll work to get the money to go on. And I think Wendell should

have the backbone to get out, too.

ALMA. Mary Lou! Hush! How can you talk like this?

ZETTA. How can she do a lot of things? . . . I'd never have thought she'd be a drinker.

MARY LOU. You don't understand. You can't understand, can you? I see a different sort of life than this. I see it and I want to live it. I don't want to hurt you. I've never wanted to hurt you, but I'll hurt you if I have to stay home now.

ALMA. Because your daddy died?

MARY LOU. No! My God, how I wish that were the reason! It's because of the things that have happened since he died. I didn't know us, any of us until today. And I'll not stay here.

ZETTA. Don't talk to Alma like that! Do you hear me?

ALMA. I didn't know you felt like that, Mary Lou. Humbly. I had no idea you felt like that. I just thought we'd all have a good time here together now.

MARY LOU. Fighting tears. No! No, no, no, no! I can't stay, and I know I'm hurting you.

ALMA. Wendell, do you feel this way?

Buell straightens up. Slowly moves down from arch center.

BUELL. No, he doesn't feel that way. She's crazy. Big words, big ideas, so let her go. Wendell can stay here and work with me.

Alma and Zetta freeze. Mama is watching intently.

ZETTA. What?

BUELL. He can stay and work with me.

ALMA. Stunned. You, Buell, at home?

BUELL. Yes, Mother, here!

ZETTA. But you're in the Army. You like it.

BUELL. I can get out.

ALMA. Getting hold of herself. What would you do? What could you do here? You mean the bank?

BUELL. No, I don't mean the bank. I mean the farm.

ZETTA. Whose farm?

BUELL. I'd like to work the family farm.

ZETTA. Mine and Alma's?

ALMA. Be a farmer?

ZETTA. But a sharecropper always did that.

ALMA. Be a sharecropper? You boys?

ZETTA. Where would you get the equipment?

BUELL. When we sell the bank stock, my part will be enough to start on.

ALMA. But the bank's always been. . . .

BUELL. I'll give you all a third, just like the sharecropper. Wendell can help me. If we make a go of it, we'll buy more land.

ALMA. But the bank. . . .

BUELL. Losing temper. Damn the bank! Are you going to let me farm your land or not?

ALMA. You want to farm, Wendell?

WENDELL. I don't know what I want to do.

MARY LOU. After seeing what he did last night, you mean you'd work with him?

BUELL. Keep your mouth out of this.

MARY LOU. I'll say what I damn well please. I know what'll happen to Wendell if he stays here with you.

BUELL. Advancing. I'm going to. . . .

WENDELL. Leave her alone, Buell!

BUELL. Turning on Wendell. Why you weak-backed weasel. You stupid weak. . . .

MAMA. Stands. Stop it, Buell! All look to her. I've tried to stay out of this. I've tried to mind my own business, but I'm sick of this squabbling and fighting while a dead man lies in yonder.

ALMA. Mama, what has Bond done to me? They all want to leave me now and sell the bank. And Buell wants to farm, be a farmer!

MAMA. What's wrong with farming? Your father was a farmer. Where do you and Zetta think you got the land?

ALMA. But a dirt farmer. . . .

MAMA. Buell has asked a question. Will you let him farm your land to get started?

ZETTA. He doesn't know how! He'll drink all the time and let the crops sit in the fields and ruin.

ALMA. I hated farming. I hated seeing Papa come in dirty every night. I wanted my kids to have clean clothes and be somebody!

ZETTA. I don't see how Buell would be happy working that hard land. I don't think he'd be happy doing anything here.

MAMA. Alma, you and Zetta answer the boy. He's asked you a question.

ALMA. I've never refused my kids anything, have I? Haven't I

always done everything for my kids? Haven't I? Haven't I? Looks at the three children but they won't meet her look. No reply. All three have heads down. Haven't I been mother and father to you? Haven't I always been everything? She pauses. Still no response. Another pause. All right! Farm the land! Sell the bank! Let Bond Rouse take the bank with him! Leave me, leave me by myself!

MARY LOU. Mother. . . . There's a silence until Zetta breaks in.

ZETTA. Loud. I haven't said he can farm my half of the land. What about me? Alma, you can't give him permission to farm my half.

MAMA. Coldly. Why, now, Zetta, I've heard you say all your childless years how much these kids meant to you. Just like your own, and you claim to half-raised them. Seems you could sharecrop out your half of the land to the eldest, the one born first. You've known him the longest, Zetta.

BUELL. You're not going to lose anything, Zetta. If I couldn't do as well as that half-wit you've got out there, I'd tell you so right now.

ALMA. Don't beg! She can do her part. She's always claimed she'd do anything for my kids, but don't beg her.

ZETTA. Why, it isn't that I don't want him to farm my land. It's just I'm afraid he'll drink and make life hell for Alma like Bond did.

MAMA. Buell's got problems to work out. Will you or won't you girls let him have a go at the land? He's good at growing things.

Mama sits back in rocker and watches them. Zetta and Alma look at each other and then at Buell.

BUELL. I'll put twenty acres in soy bean and corn and the rest

in cotton. We can get government trees to plant as wind breaks around that southeast corner at that sand-blow.

ZETTA. I wash my hands of the whole thing. Whatever you want to do about it is all right with me, Alma. They're your kids.

WENDELL. Mama, what about me? What am I going to do?

MAMA. I don't know, Wendell. You're so soft and sweet, not like the rest.

WENDELL. Should I stay?

MAMA. Wendell, it's going to be hard, but you've got to make up your own mind.

It begins raining outside. Wendell goes to sit downstage right. Puts his head in his hand and cries softly. Alma starts toward him, but she's stopped by Mama.

MAMA. Leave the boy alone, Alma.

ALMA. But he's crying, Mama.

MAMA. Just leave him alone. Lots of people cry when there's been a death.

ALMA. Oh, why did he die? What did he have to die for?

BUELL. I'll take care of things around here now, Mother. Let the others do what they want to.

ALMA. Yes. You'll be living at home now, won't you?

BUELL. It's settled then. I'll go back right away to see about my discharge.

ZETTA. To herself. A life of living hell, that's what. Bond has fixed that up for good.

Knock on door.

ALMA. They've come for him. It's time.

BUELL. Looks at his watch. Come on, Wendell, we've got to get our ties.

Wendell numbly exits with him to bedroom. Alma goes to the door, pauses, and opens it. Lottie enters with preacher. Their raincoats are wet.

PREACHER. Are you ready, Mrs. Rouse? Miz Lottie came to stay with your mother.

ALMA. Brother Palmer, I want to. . . .

PREACHER. You don't have to say a word. We understand. The terrible thing is that it happened at a time like this. But now set it aside. You've got to be strong for the funeral and burial. Then it will all be over.

ALMA. Bitterly. Then it will all be over.

ZETTA. It's raining still. I hoped so much it wouldn't rain.

MARY LOU. Hadn't we better get our hats and coats, Mother?

ALMA. Yes. Come on Zetta.

They exit arch.

LOTTIE. Going to Mama. Well, we'll just stay here where it's dry, and we'll have us a good time all by ourselves.

MAMA. It's nice of you to come sit with me, Lottie. I just wasn't up to going to the funeral.

LOTTIE. Of course not. A woman your age can't be wading around in the mud and rain.

PREACHER. The cars are already lined up almost down to the main street. Mr. Rouse sure knew a lot of people.

Buell and Wendell enter. Stand behind the couch. Wendell doesn't look up, but Buell stares straight ahead.

PREACHER. Hello, boys.

Both murmur hello.

LOTTIE. Don't the boys look nice!

MAMA. Yes. They're fine looking men, both of them.

PREACHER. To them. The church is going to be packed. Cars are lined up almost to Main Street.

Awkward pause. Alma, Zetta, Mary Lou enter, hats and raincoats on.

PREACHER. Now, we're ready. Mrs. Rouse, there's a car to take you and the children to the church. The funeral home will take the flowers in here and the body after you're out of the house.

ALMA. What about Zetta, Brother Palmer?

PREACHER. Oh, yes. Everett will take Zetta in his car.

ZETTA. I thought I should be with the family.

ALMA. Zetta, I think that's a nice arrangement. You, my sister, and Bond's best friend together.

PREACHER. I thought it worked out nicely, too.

Zetta starts sniffing in hankie.

PREACHER. Now strutting with organization. Since Mrs. Rouse requests that the casket not be open for viewing at the service, the family will want to have their last glimpse of the loved one.

ALMA. You mean now?

PREACHER. Yes. You and the children can be alone with him for a moment. Zetta, I'll take you out to Everett's car. He's waiting. Then I'll come back, Mrs. Rouse.

ZETTA. But. . . .

ALMA. Go on, Zetta. Boys, come here.

Zetta and preacher exit as the Rouses awkwardly crowd through the arch.

LOTTIE. Going to bedroom. I'll go freshen up your bed in case you'd like to lie down. Exits.

MAMA. Thank you, Lottie. Mama sits alone, rocking with her head back, eyes closed.

In a few seconds the Rouses come back in room. Buell doesn't lift his head. Wendell paws at his head, rubbing his cheek trying not to cry. Mary Lou looks straight ahead. Alma's chin trembles terribly. But there are no tears. They're standing huddled together as the Preacher puts his head in the door.

PREACHER. Everyone together? The eldest son takes his mother. And the youngest son brings his sister. Now we're ready. He disappears.

Buell falls in line with Alma. She looks at him and timidly takes his arm and automatically gives a twitch to his tie to straighten it. They stand as if afraid to move until they glance at Mama and she makes a shooin' motion with her crossword puzzle. They mechanically move on out door as Mama bends over the puzzle.

END